



## Andrea Pisac - Emerging Politics of Authorship: Recovering Collectivity, Negotiating the Risk

### 1. Introduction

This article examines authorship as a socially embedded process by challenging Western notions of the autonomous creative genius. It considers social interactions between various agents in the field of literary production which in turn recovers the collective nature of modern authorship. Far from leaving it unexamined, it further contextualises authorial collectivity and its role in the emerging model of authorship.

Questions and arguments raised in this article are informed by the ethnographic data collected during my doctoral research focusing on the reception of post-1990s ex-Yugoslav literature on the UK book market[1]. Such ethnographic approach to literary translations - i.e. the micro-level analysis of social interactions that 'create' literature - demonstrated how the author is 'created' in the communication of two literary systems through linguistic translation as well as re-translations of symbolic and social capitals. My research was concerned with analysing the 'backstage' of the publishing industry - informal networks and international literary geopolitics - which all contributed to debunking the myth of the autonomous creative genius. However, instead of retracing my steps, this article outlines new avenues and questions that such analysis has opened up. One such question is how new technologies are (re)constructing and (re)positioning the role of the author.

With the commercialisation and digitalisation of publishing, the collective nature of authorship is becoming more explicit, as many authors are required to create readership through online social media marketing. Publishers believe that, with such online presence, they are able to mitigate their own risks. At the same time, however, they are redefining the concept of authorship by creating the so called 'tribal author'[2] whose success depends on increasingly democratised tastes of their readers. In such newly posited literary field, the focus should be directed towards the following questions: how democratic are readers' tastes; what purpose does the new concept of authorship serve; and finally, how are creative talent and intellectual property of the 'tribal author' constructed?

### 2. The Modern Author

Studies of the construction of authorship (Coombe 1998; Higgins 2005; Williams 1988; Woodmansee 1994; Woodmansee and Jaszi 1994) have argued that individual creative genius as different from common people was a product of the 18th century 'Romantic ideology' which served to handle competition on a newly-emerging literary market. In his study of that era's literary magazines, David Higgins (2005) argues that Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley were portrayed as transcending the political and commercial constraints of their time by the force of their artistic originality. Shown as fundamentally different from 'normal' people, the creative genius was thought to be divinely inspired; as such, their personalities and private lives became of growing interest (ibid., 3). Raymond Williams (1988) and Pierre Bourdieu (1969) explain the rise of this model of artist at that particular time as, in part, a compensatory response to the decline of patronage and the growth of a reading public that had enabled the literary field to form. Relatively autonomous from political and religious authority, this social field enabled the artist/intellectual to feel obliged mostly to the demands of their creative project. Bourdieu further notices that, the more autonomous the creative field, the more the idea of 'pure aesthetics' prevails as a force arranging the hierarchy of social positions. His critique of pure (Kantian) aesthetics argues that a number of consecrating agents (publishers, reviewers, editors within the literary field) jointly create the symbolic value of a work of art (Bourdieu 1996). The genius author, perceived as unbound by material considerations, was an important strategy for achieving distinction in the late-18th-century literary marketplace, suddenly saturated with products. The authorial aura of divinity obscured marketplace realities.

Standing out from the crowd became a sign of artistic quality at a time of rapid literary production (Higgins 2005: 8).

Martha Woodmansee has argued that '[a]uthorship does not exist to innocent eyes; they see only writing and texts' (Woodmansee & Jaszi 1994: 1). Her well-known essay 'The Genius and the Copyright' (Woodmansee 1994b) elucidates how socio-economic and cultural as well as philosophical and aesthetic factors created what is now represented as a timeless and universal phenomenon of authorship. Before Romanticism, art was seen instrumentally rather than aesthetically, whilst those involved in producing books - the writer, papermaker, typesetter, printer, bookbinder, and publisher - were perceived as deserving equal credit and profits from the final product (ibid., 49). A writer was first and foremost an artisan: 'a skilled manipulator of predefined strategies for achieving goals dictated by his audience' (ibid., 36). It was the German writers of the late 18th century who fought for the recognition of their labour as intellectual property and who ushered in the modern idea of authorship and copyright. In order to claim it, writers, caught between limited patronage and the emerging literary marketplace, first had to be portrayed as individual original creators. The introduction of copyright entitled writers not to a small honorarium, as before, but a profit from what became their distinct property.[3] The modern author thus had to be conceptualised as autonomous, cut off from their social relations (Strathern 1996) and unbound by material considerations.

“**Today, the Romantic concept of authorship and assumptions about creativity as an original individual inspiration...**

Today, the Romantic concept of authorship and assumptions about creativity as an original individual inspiration still have a hold on both the legal and aesthetic treatment of literature. The most valued literary work is thought to be unique - not derived from prior texts but deviating from them (Woodmansee & Jaszi 1994: 17). Unlike in the Middle Ages or Renaissance, when the

text's authority rested on its affiliation with precedents,[4] the Romantic view of creativity centred on breaking away from tradition and creating something utterly new - in this sense, a Romantic writer often implies a dose of social transgression.[5] By engaging with Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?' (Foucault 1979) Woodmansee asks several questions in order to recover the collectivity of the writing process and author attribution: how the author became individualised; when studies of authenticity and attribution began; and the origin of the interest in authors' lives as heroic. Her argument that most writing, whether scientific, legal, or creative, is in reality a collaborative process speaks to Bourdieu's notion of the collectivity of the creative project (Bourdieu 1969). There he concludes that 'the relationship between the creative artist and his work [...] is affected by the system of social relations within which creation as an act of communication takes place' (ibid., 161). The work is always collective, Bourdieu argues, because it becomes the object of others' valuation through which its public meaning is established. A collective judgement of the 'value and truth of the work' defines the author and ascribes them a position in the web of social relations. Yet the notion of the creative genius obscures this very collectivity to establish itself as a natural, taken-for-granted phenomenon, or in Bourdieu's words, *doxa*.

In more recent studies of how such narratives affect law, Rosemary Coombe (1994) has shown that celebrities' so-called image rights also assume the originating individuality of the author. She asks 'who authors the celebrity' and concludes that any such persona is always a product of collaborative efforts of studios, the mass media, photographers, fitness coaches, ghost-writers, etc., and in particular the audience themselves. Moreover, a celebrity is always socio-historically situated, and these conditions give the meaning, resonance and authority to their image (ibid., 111). Similarly, Peter Jaszi claims that, because authors' value and popularity is embedded in their socio-cultural context, they are also perceived as capturing the 'essence' and 'truth' of a culture or nation (Woodmansee & Jaszi 1994: 35). Unlike copyright, which legally protects authors' intellectual property, representing 'their tradition' could be understood as authors' 'moral' right or duty. The concept of authorship is thus revealed as a composite of various meanings, including a) individual originality expressed as authenticity, and b) authority or the right to represent.

### 3. Authorship as Social Performance or Brand

The discussion of the socio-historical construction of modern authorship[6] leads us to consider authors as cultural brokers, i.e. agents in the literary field who, through their authorial voice, facilitate the flow of (translated)[7] literature. The idea of the individual creative genius which eventually supported the claim for intellectual property was not only a reflection of the free-market narrative and its projection of an unconstrained individual, but a foundation of what in the 20th century became known as marketing. The emotional appeal on

which products' symbolic value rests nowadays was already implicit in the aura of creative genius that has since imbued modern authors. In this paragraph I will briefly comment on my findings of how authors and their literary outputs become brands on the UK market of foreign literature.

The contemporary book market is organised around literary brands, powerful symbols that perform authorial authenticity and replace foreign literature's use value with symbolic value. If writing 200 years ago was perceived as a craft, no more elevated than book-binding, proof-reading, or other activities necessary to produce a book, literature today is consumed mainly for its symbolic value. Translated literature in the UK itself is branded as a source of cultural difference and a sign of liberal democratic values, and reflects a discerned taste positioned extremely highly in the legitimising hierarchy. The consumption of literature, thus, involves more than communication between reader and text: it reflects a particular experience and lifestyle that both distinguishes and unites people along those lines (Bourdieu 1984). In the branding process, authors appear as authentic personalities and cultural brokers, who anchor readers' desire to sample varieties of (ethnic/different) spaces and times in the *here-and-now*. Understanding authors as cultural brokers reveals not only the process through which they construct their authenticity, but also its salience. Within the narrative of alterity and cultural difference, authenticity has become the crucible through which cultural values and beliefs between foreign writers and domestic readers are aligned. Trust that the writer is a 'genuine' voice from abroad is achieved through social performance, made possible only if both performer and audience speak the same cultural 'code'[8]. Even outside the context of translated/foreign literature, the value of the 'authentic' authorial voice rates among the highest both with publishers looking for new talents and with readers who want new heroes to identify with.

The functions of representing the author as a creative genius, therefore, were at least twofold: securing profit from individual intellectual property and providing a sense of distinctiveness and artistic quality. Being different and distinguished on the market, i.e. being authentic, was a necessary strategy to deal with competition. It is safe to say that authors who are

“ ***The functions of representing the author as a creative genius, therefore, were at least twofold...*** ”

perceived as authentic voices have a strong brand. Marketing can thus in many ways be understood as social performance. Jeffery Alexander (2006) explains how the authentic author as a social agent can create a desired effect and affect in contemporary, complex societies, in which elements of performance[9] have been defused: i.e. where actors do not necessarily share the same beliefs and values nor accept the validity of one another's acts. Such stratified, differentiated, and reflexive contexts create a greater need for simplified and symbolic acts of communication that generate trust in the validity of cultural contents and authenticity of one another's strategic intentions (ibid., 31). The goal of a social performance, he further argues, is the same as that of a sacred ritual: producing psychological identification and cultural extension. When this is achieved, the elements of the performance have been re-fused and the act experienced as authentic and convincing. Authenticity thus depends on the actor's ability 'to sew the disparate elements of performance into a seamless and convincing whole' (ibid., 55). This line of argument echoes Bourdieu's contention that culture stops appearing artificial only through the act of denial. Then, social powers manifest themselves not as external hegemonic forces but merely as means of representation, as conveyors of the intended meaning.

Any social performance, including the author brand, is embedded in a socio-cultural context, which allows it to be effective. Branding thus depends on what Alexander calls background representation - a cookbook of narratives, codes, and rhetorics that are dominant in certain times and collectivities (ibid., 59). This information allows the audience to understand the performance and to participate in the affectual exchange. This is particularly important in the context of translated literature, as the foreign author, in order to appear authentic, draws on the background representation of UK culture. They can only do so, of course, if they have already, to a large degree, internalised this dominant code: for many writers a position of living in exile provides this. For some, this will mean blending in, but for others authenticity will lie in constant transgression. Either way, whether talking for or against the UK cultural code, their performance will be achieved only if the brand is able to speak to the audience *through* the background representation on which they too can draw (Alexander and Mast 2006: 14). Marketing is thus a performative that *does* things through its repetitive and ritualistic communication with the audience.

#### **4. Intellectual Property Relations**

The idea of creative genius was mobilised in order for writers to become differentiated and competitive on the 18th century literary market freeing itself from court patronage. These ideas eventually lead to the invention of

copyright, through which process the writer became an author. As natural as they appear to us today, they are products of so-called 'possessive individualism' (Macpherson, et al. 1964), a thought that has prevailed within the Protestant ethic and laid foundations for the free-market model.

Anthropological studies of personhood and property relation can offer much insight into how and why it was important to establish a writer as an individual, cut off from their social network. Thus Marilyn Strathern (1996) points to a difference between Euro-American conceptions of patents and Melanesian understandings of personhood. The former is a claim to invention, thus a property right, also indicating the alteration of nature by culture. In other words, a network of scientists or artists, 'as string of obligations, a chain of colleagues, a history of co-operation' (ibid., 524) that is sustained by continuities of identity is cut off at the prospect of ownership. Ownership, i.e. copyright, cuts into the network and obfuscates social actors' existence as an aggregation of relations, 'a composite of past transactions with diverse others' (ibid., 526).

Other anthropological studies of property relations have added new insights into ideas and practices of authorship. The anthropologists Chris Hann and Katherine Verdery (1998; 2004) thus reconceptualise the universal, natural, and neutral concept of private property by recognising its historical contingency and social embeddedness. In *Property Relations*, Hann asserts that the essential nature of property lies in social relations rather than in inherent qualities of an object called *property*: thus, property relations are social relations. Verdery in *Property in Question* similarly emphasises the relational view instead of conflating *property* with *thing*. She goes on to question the boundedness of either *person* or *thing* (e.g. a book) within property relations, suggesting that people might not be unified and consistent through time while objects might consist of assemblages of social relations rather than antedating them.

“ **Although the author is still perceived as a sole owner of their intellectual property, digital writing has undoubtedly affected social relations...**

Considering the socio-historic contingency and embeddedness of authorship both as a concept and a set of practices becomes crucial in understanding the changes that contemporary publishing industry is experiencing. Recent developments, such as online publishing and blogging, have uncovered the collective nature of authorship rather than suppressed it. Although the author is still perceived as a sole owner of their intellectual property, digital writing has undoubtedly affected

social relations between author, text and reader, as writers are increasingly perceived as belonging to and representing their 'tribe'. Through online communication, their texts are not only open for various interpretations but are influenced by readers' ideas and intentions. Writing/translating of literature has thus become more collective in nature, allowing the reader to become a contributor in an unending process of reading and writing. Jay Bolter (2000) has argued that such developments reverse the trajectory of print and invoke the collaborative writing milieu of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Internet writing, he argues, can be compared to a medieval manuscript whose margins were used for conducting a dialogue with the text. Recovering collectivity digitally in the emerging context of social marketing is additionally important as it touches on the topic of risk. This is namely because most authors today are encouraged to have a strong online presence by which to contribute to self-marketing, one of the ways in which publishers try to mitigate their own risks and cut their top-down publicity costs. Having in mind this new type of 'tribal author', who engages with the text and readers in such collaborative ways, we should focus on the following questions: what kind of skills, beliefs, and values does the 'tribal author' need to possess in order to succeed on the literary market? If the concept of individual creative genius helped the 18th century writer to establish their social position, what directions is the 21st century writer (and the surrounding literary field) taking? A short ethnographic vignette that I now turn to can offer some directions. However, as I explained at the outset, instead of offering finite answers to these questions, this ethnography should be viewed as a spring board for the future analyses of ideas and practices of authorship.

## 5. 'Authonomy'

'Authonomy' is a neologism; a linguistic cross-over between the words 'autonomy' and 'author'. It is also a website (<http://www.authonomy.com>) run by a publishing giant HarperCollins where unpublished writers submit their work and are judged by a wide online community. The idea behind this project is for HarperCollins to mitigate the risk of publishing a flop and increase its likelihood of spotting a bestseller. The website, however, is marketed as a hyper-democratisation of reader choice and a benefit for everyone: readers decide what they want to see published, writers get their work noticed without battling with gatekeepers, publishers enjoy an increasing profit. By tapping into the already-established narrative of the free market where everyone has a chance to succeed

(writers) and the right to choose their commodity (readers), the project creates a new mythology of authorship. The writer is perceived as an autonomous social actor, completely unconstrained by editors' and publishers' opinions: all they have to do is win over their readership on the *authonomy* website. The top five writers with most votes secure a publishing deal with Harper Collins, an event the website markets as 'when a writer becomes an author'. Having bypassed the usual *friends-of-friends-agent-publisher* route, the writer thus 'autonomously' becomes a published author. In reality, however, the writer has emerged from the expectations, values, and tastes of their online community as well as from this new publishing mythology. Its narrative represents the 'autonomous' writer as a resourceful, publishing industry-independent, and community-beloved individual. All the while, though, these social interactions take place in a snazzy virtual space expertly designed, hosted, and supported at HarperCollins's expense.

Various competing narratives of authorship are taking place in this ethnographic example. Firstly, the modern author as an individual creative genius, unconstrained by material considerations, is still alive in the way publishers as well as readers understand their relationship to their creation. Publishers look for 'talent' - a divinely inspired individual - obscuring a wide range of (power)relations that uphold the concept of literary taste: something that obviously defines talent. So even if they claim to have democratised the process of 'finding a talent', by giving more power and responsibility to readers themselves, the actual notion of the creative literary talent has persisted. Author as a bounded personhood, entitled to intellectual property, remains unchallenged. Simultaneously, the author's relationship to their audience (only ostensibly) changes, as they become more of and for 'their tribe': the readers. I say ostensibly because the concept of 'the tribal author', just as much as the one of modern author, is revealed as a socio-cultural position, a set of negotiations, through which the writer is able to remain relevant and competitive on the ever-changing literary market. In reality, what readers choose to read is already deeply influenced by the media and other kinds of contextual factors. If publishers have exchanged their top-down marketing approach for the 'tribes' approach, this does not mean that everyone blogging out there is equally successful. The (re)positioning of consecrating agents in the literary field does not mean that literature has or will become a purely aesthetic act. On the contrary, the very representation of this 'democratising' project maintains within the literary field a hierarchy of positions imbued with various types of capital (cultural, symbolic, social). How else could we explain successes of only a few bloggers; why else would the HarperCollins, and not just any, website appeal to young unpublished writers?

## 6. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that authorship is not a naturally and universally occurring phenomenon. The Romantic idea of the author as a creative genius was and continues to be as socio-culturally constructed as is the emerging notion of 'the tribal author'. The former, by obscuring the social network of relations, defined the writer as a divinely inspired individual. With this, the author was able to distinguish themselves from common - non-talented - people and to claim remuneration for their creation. The latter notion of authorship recovers the collective nature of creation through a redefined relationship between the writer, the text and the reader. Although it preserves the idea of talent as a writer's distinguishing quality, it positions the author much closer to their readership: the author is of and for their 'tribe'. The new digital technologies of writing, allowing not only easier re-writing of the text, but also author's online presence, have undoubtedly shifted the perceptions of collectivity and individualism within the literary field of production. However, the aim of this article has been to ask questions which would help us critically analyse how, in what context and for what purpose has the notion of collectivity been recovered. The answers can direct us in charting and defining the identity of the new 'tribal author'.

## Bibliography

Alexander, J. C., Giesen, B., and Mast, J. L. 2006. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Bolter, J. D. 2000. *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bourdieu, P. 1969. 'Intellectual Field and Creative Project'. Trans. S. France. *Social Science Information*, 8: 89-119.

--- 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. R. Nice. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

--- 1996. *The Rules of Art*. Trans. S. Emanuel. Cambridge: Polity.

Coombe, R. J. 1998. *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation, and the Law*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP

Foucault, M. 1979. 'What Is an Author?', in J. V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

Goffman, E. 1990. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Hann, C. M. 1998. 'Introduction: The Embeddedness of Property', in C. M. Hann (ed.), *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Higgins, D. M. 2005. *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity and Politics*. London: Routledge.

Macpherson, C. B., Hobbes, T. A., and Locke, J. A. 1964. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Strathern, M. 1996. 'Cutting the Network', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2 (3): 517-35.

Verdery, K., and Humphrey, C. 2004. 'Introduction: Raising Questions About Property', in K. Verdery and C. Humphrey (eds.), *Property in Question: Value Transformation in the Global Economy*. Oxford: Berg.

Williams, R. 1988. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Press.

Woodmansee, M. 1994a. *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*. New York and Chichester: Columbia UP.

--- 1994b. 'Genius and the Copyright', *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*. New York and Chichester: Columbia UP.

Woodmansee, M. and Jaszi, P. 1994. *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP.

---

[1] My concluding arguments were that: a) literary translations of ex-Yugoslav fiction (from 1990s onwards) are socio-political as much as literary phenomena; b) literary exchange depended on political events in the region and the UK media response to them, reflecting previously established images of the Balkans as primitive and uncivilised; c) literary aesthetics/taste is constructed through social relations and dominant narratives that promote only certain types of writing; d) exiled ex-Yugoslav authors were perceived as dissenting voices of post-socialist totalitarianism and the Western narrative of free-speech protection contributed to their international relevance. My ethnography illustrated that successful publication in English almost always relied on the combination of personal connections and global political affairs. Other literary markets, such as German, French or Scandinavian, have been perceived as less commercial and more literary.

[2] This expression has been used by Anglophone publishers to refer to authors who cultivate and multiply their readership through blogging and being available to their readers.

[3] Johann Gottlieb Fichte's 1793 essay 'Proof of the Illegality of Reprinting: A Rationale and a Parable' was instrumental in defining authors' intellectual property. Distinguishing the physical and ideal aspects of a book, Fichte argued for three distinct shares of property: when a book is sold, ownership of the physical object passes to the buyer; so do the author's thoughts and ideas; but the form in which these ideas are presented remains with the author for ever (Woodmansee 1994b: 51).

[4] This position also implied a place in a 'literary genealogy' and a relation with previous and subsequent texts.

[5] Transgressor and 'neglected'/'suffering' genius were common social positions, imbued with much symbolic capital and political charge in post-socialist countries.

[6] The modern notion of authorship, i.e. the single author with no genealogy, was understood quite differently in the Middle Ages. Chaucer, for example, speaks of authorship, but also of authority to tell a tale, which came from placing yourself in a literary lineage and stating the story's provenance, i.e. denying that you made it up (Catherine Alexander, personal communication, 26 Nov 2010).

[7] Majority of my examples refer to the research conducted in the context of foreign/translated literature being imported into the UK literary canon.

[8] The ethnography from my doctoral research demonstrates that cultural difference as represented in literary translations has become a desirable commodity due to two major paradigm shifts: from belonging to 'culture' to consuming 'culture', and from consuming commodities to constructing lifestyles. An increased globalisation of fragmentation has included more localities and 'cultures' in translated literature as commodity but they are expressed in a limited number of themes and narratives. Foreign literature has been objectified in more than one way, stripped of its political and transformational potential by being flattened out and shot through with domestic cultural representations, and 'used' by consumers to construct their (self-)images and lifestyles. The social groups that have mainly aspired to translated literature as a commodity are those that have supported neoliberal ideas of democracy, in itself a loaded commodity sign resting on the evolutionist narrative.

[9] According to Alexander, elements of performance are actors, observers/audience, means of symbolic production (standardised expressive equipment as described by Goffman (1990) in his study of impression management, such as clothes, speech, or distribution of space), and social power.

---

Autori: Datum objave:  
Andrea Pisac 03.11.2011