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1967: The Birth of “The Death of the Author”

John Logie

The concept of authorship is central to US copyright law and thus, to the increasing repositioning of copyrights, patents, trademarks, and trade secrets as “intellectual property” over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The constitutional clause now sometimes referred to as the intellectual property clause (Article I, Section 8) grants Congress the power “[t]o promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” Much as understanding what defines an inventor and what counts as an invention creation is central to understanding patent laws, understanding authors and authorship is foundational to understanding and evaluating US copyright laws. But despite being bundled together under the “intellectual property” umbrella, these laws have diverged from one another. For example, the terms of protection granted by US patent laws have remained roughly constant since the first Congress passed the first patent law in 1790. This initial term was fourteen years, and it is now twenty years. By contrast, copyright terms have expanded dramatically, with the initial fourteen-year term (with the possibility of a one-time renewal for an additional fourteen years) having been extended multiple times to the now-current base standard of the life of the author plus seventy years. Additionally, the scope of copyright has expanded dramatically, so much so that a recent revision to US copyright law expressly granted copyright protection to boat hulls.

Repeated expansions of US copyright law have stretched the concept of authorship to its very limits while maintaining strong ownership claims for authors

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or—more commonly—for the author’s heirs or assigns. But within the academy, the notion of the author as the default owner of compositions has undergone sustained interrogation and critique. For the most recent generations of scholars addressing questions of authorship and textual ownership, Roland Barthes’s 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” is a central text, widely cited and referenced. This essay set the stage for recalibrated understandings of authorship that are notable for repositioning authorship as far more limited and provisional than the founding fathers believed it to be. And this revised understanding reverberates throughout the academy, from discussions in the most erudite graduate seminars to the pedagogical decisions driving some first-year composition classes.¹

Barthes’s essay has proven especially important for scholars and critics challenging traditional understandings of an implicitly Romantic author as the solitary, originary, and proprietary creator of literary texts.² Bolstered by Michel Foucault’s 1969 rejoinder, “What Is an Author?” Barthes’s text has provided an anchoring point for waves of theoretical challenges to this “capital A” Author. Elements of Barthes’s argument have been taken up by scholars and critics associated with feminist critique, reader-response criticism, rhetorical theory, composition studies, and cultural studies . . . and this list is by no means exhaustive. Among the more prominent of these citations is Toril Moi’s invocation of Barthes in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, where Moi writes, “For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of *authority*, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author,” and then quotes at length from “The Death” (62–63, original emphasis). Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede prominently feature the essay in their chapter titled “The Concept of Authorship” in their *Singular Texts/Plural Authors* (77–78). Perhaps most significantly for the focus of this issue of *College English*, Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi’s introduction to their 1994 edited collection *The Construction of Authorship* decries the degree to which “Barthes’ call in ‘The Death of the Author’ for a reversal of the conventional relation of author and reader has gone unheard by intellectual property lawyers” (8).³

In a US context, “The Death” is now almost certainly the most read of Barthes’s essays, especially within fields associated with literature, language, and rhetoric, even though the circumstances of its composition make clear that it was *never* meant to be a traditional literary or scholarly essay. Indeed, for reasons that will become clear, the term *essay* is at best one of convenience if we understand “The Death” within the unusual context of its original publication.

Today, many readers who encounter the essay do so by reading it within *Image-Music-Text*, a 1977 anthology of major essays from throughout Barthes’s career. The work is also widely anthologized, appearing, for example, in tightly focused edited collections such as Seán Burke’s 1995 *Authorship*, and also expansive volumes such as all of the editions of David Lodge and Nigel Wood’s *Modern Criticism and Theory*

(three editions published from 1991 to 2008). Enterprising students might also find the annotated full text of the essay online at websites such as deathoftheauthor.com. But readers who encounter the text in any of these (or similar) spaces will be likely to misunderstand the cultural context in which Barthes was writing. Indeed, when the essay is presented as within traditional scholarly frames, it is being stripped of important cultural markers that—at the time of its publication—identified it as a participant in a broad challenge to *the very idea of these frames*. Indeed, I argue here that “The Death” should be presented and understood as a site-specific work, whose primary focus was *not* Barthes’s participation in a long line of scholarly and literary constructions and deconstructions of authorship, but rather his participation in a loosely organized international aggregation of antifoundationalist artistic movements. Further, though the work is routinely linked to a dramatic May 1968 political uprising in Paris, it was composed at least a full six months before those events. To the extent that the essay has a “revolutionary spirit,” it is an *artistic* revolution that Barthes had in mind and not the particular political pressures that led to the “May Events.” Those who draw value from invoking Barthes’s radical gesture without understanding its historical and cultural context run the risk of emphasizing this essay’s purported political commitments too heavily, and thereby failing to fully underscore his attentiveness to questions of authorship as they were being informed by an increasingly *multimedia* artistic culture.

Most critical to properly understanding “The Death” is understanding the specifics of the publication forum Barthes chose—or more properly, the forum that chose Barthes—for the initial presentation of his essay: issue 5+6 of *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box*, titled “The Minimalism Issue.” As its full title implies, *Aspen* was an arts magazine with a strikingly unusual format. Each issue arrived in a box, though the boxes varied in shape, size, and contents. Over the course of ten issues (or eleven if the double issue housing “The Death” is counted as two) from 1965 to 1971, the *Aspen* boxes housed individual print artifacts (including posters and postcards), phonograph recordings, musical scores, booklets, games, cardboard cutouts, and other varied objects, including a facsimile “pocket diary of the future” by John Lennon. Lennon’s involvement in *Aspen* makes a kind of sense when one takes into account the other participants in the *Aspen* project. Among the contributors were key players in the Fluxus art community, including John Cage, John Cale, Nam Jun Paik, and Lennon’s future wife Yoko Ono, then known primarily for her conceptual and performance art pieces. The third issue of *Aspen* was the “Pop Art” issue, with a box designed by Andy Warhol that closely resembled a Fab detergent carton. Inside that box—among other items—were a flexi-disc with the first recording credited to the Velvet Underground (though it was a recording of feedback “performed” by only John Cale) and a “ticket book” with excerpts from papers given at the “Berkeley Confer-

ence on LSD” by Timothy Leary and others. The following issue, number 4, was “The McLuhan Issue” designed by McLuhan’s close collaborator, Quentin Fiore.⁴

In short, *Aspen* targeted a between-space incorporating elements of both traditional publication and radical audience participation akin to what was happening in the “happenings” of that era. Editor Phyllis Johnson, who had previously worked as an editor for *Women’s Wear Daily* and *Advertising Age*, closed the first issue of her magazine in a box with an ambitious statement of her intentions for the publication. Chief among them was *Aspen*’s purposeful rejection of the traditional structures and strictures of print:

For this first issue we’ve started out with a rather dignified format, but who knows what the next issue will be! Perhaps the booklets will be done in the manner of illuminated manuscripts or Japanese scrolls. Perhaps each will be a different size and color. Perhaps they’ll include blueprints, a bit of rock, wildflower seeds, tea samples, an opera libretti, old newspapers, jigsaw puzzles. In short, “Aspen” is the first three-dimensional magazine.

During the fitful six years encompassing *Aspen*’s ten issues, the magazine largely lived up to Johnson’s statement of purpose. Each successive issue included a widening array of media types, with almost all of the issues incorporating sound recordings, and issue 5+6 even incorporating a reel of Super-8 films by Hungarian Bauhaus professor, painter, and photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and American neo-Dadaist artist Robert Rauschenberg (among others).

I am by no means the first scholar to point up the significance of the circumstances surrounding the publication of “The Death.” The *first* to call attention to the significance of *Aspen* 5+6 as the cultural space for Barthes’s text was probably Molly Nesbit, in a brilliant 1987 essay titled “What Was an Author?” for *Yale French Studies*. But as this title suggests, Nesbit’s primary focus is on Foucault, and her treatment of Barthes’s “The Death” is glancing. Nesbit’s essay was also included in Burke’s 1995 anthology *Authorship* (a must-read for those interested in the broader intellectual and theoretical conversation in which Barthes is now said to have intervened). Given the relative prominence of Nesbit’s essay in a work likely on the bookshelves of many who study Barthes and authorship, the apparent lack of attention to the specifics of Barthes’s initial publication by scholars in literary studies and its associated fields is puzzling.

Then again, for all the significance that many US scholars attach to “The Death,” it should also be noted that surprisingly few of the career-spanning studies of Barthes and his writings attach special significance to this particular essay. Louis-Jean Calvet’s *Roland Barthes*—the first comprehensive biography of Barthes, which was initially published in French in 1990—does not mention “The Death” at all. The bibliography for Annette Laver’s 1982 monograph *Roland Barthes* contains

a list of selected articles that passes over the 1967 US publication of "The Death" in favor of other (presumably more significant) efforts. Chapter 13 of Laver's book even features a subsection titled "Characters, Actions, Authors" wherein "The Death" is not cited or referenced. It appears that until at least the early 1990s—and particularly from a European standpoint—"The Death" was not seen as an especially significant part of Barthes's *oeuvre*. The current status of the essay is thus attributable to its prominent citation by stateside scholars who saw the work as a critical step in critiquing authorship and setting the stage for various stripes of countertraditional criticism. But what US scholars now see as perhaps the quintessential Barthes essay routinely fell beneath the scope of book-length treatments of Barthes and his work until the last two decades.

Even more surprising, in some book-length works dedicated to understanding Barthes and his writings, scholars have directly misstated the date of first publication for "The Death." For example, Rick Rylance's 1994 *Roland Barthes*, published as part of Harvester Wheatsheaf's Modern Cultural Theorists series, references "The Death" just once in the main text and once in a chronology of Barthes's life and works (along with significant works by "fellow travelers") in the book's front matter. The pertinent entries in this chronology read as follows:

- 1967 *The Fashion System*. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Derrida, *Writing and Difference; Of Grammatology*.
- 1968 "The death of the author." The near-revolution of the "May Events." Though increasingly out of sympathy with the younger generation, Barthes's attitude is distantly supportive. His radical heyday is over. Begins the auto-critique of structuralism in his still-popular seminar. (xvii)

To be absolutely fair to Rylance, there is some basis for this misunderstanding. Although *Aspen* 5+6 is a double issue clearly dated "Fall-Winter 1967," the publication of "The Death" violated the conventional distribution pattern for Barthes's writings, in which initial publications in French—Barthes's native tongue—were followed by English-language translations months or even years later. But in this case, the publication of Richard Howard's translation—clearly marked as such—in *Aspen* unequivocally predates the French-language publication. The initial French publication of "La mort de l'auteur" was indeed in 1968, in the journal *Manteia*. Indeed, "La morte" was published *no earlier than September* 1968, as another piece in the issue—Pierre Roland's translation of "Two Vedic Hymns"—is clearly marked as having been completed in that month. This means that the English-language translation of "The Death" that appeared in *Aspen* 5+6 was published nearly a full year before the French version. Despite this, it is by no means uncommon—as demonstrated by Rylance's text—for scholarly references to the *English*-language title to be followed by parentheses specifying 1968 as its publication date.

This is, simply put, *wrong*.

Another example of the misdating phenomenon can be found in Graham Allen's *Roland Barthes*, published as part of the Routledge Critical Thinkers series in 2003. Allen writes,⁵

As Barthes' famous essay "The Death of the Author" (1968) [*sic*] reiterates, structural analysis must dispense with the author completely, reading the signs of narration and of reading purely within the system of narrative itself. (60-1)

In Allen's introduction, he cites "The Death" as one of the texts that "readers concerned with literature" are likely to begin with when they commence reading Barthes (4). Allen also titles his third chapter "The Death of the Author," and therein frames an argument that Barthes's essay is responding in part to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Allen situates "The Death" squarely amid the theoretical stances developed within the circle of writers contributing to the avant-garde French literary magazine *Tel Quel*, including luminaries such as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Bernard Henri Levy, and Umberto Eco. But the real reason for Allen's misdating is, perhaps, revealed in his first sustained paragraph on Barthes's text:

Barthes' 1968 [*sic*] essay "The Death of the Author" is perhaps the most widely read essay he ever wrote. Studied in countless university courses and cited in thousands of academic articles, it has led to a cultural myth of Barthes himself. To cite just one publisher's recent statement or blurb: "Roland Barthes was a leading expert in semiology and cultural theory; he became notorious for his announcement of 'The Death of the Author' in 1968 [*sic*]." We have already seen that rather more pressing events were occurring in 1968 than Barthes' brief articulation of post-structuralist theory, and it is clearly part of the mythologizing process of such pronouncements to help create the notoriety to which they seem innocently to refer. (73)

The "rather more pressing events" Graham Allen references are the May 1968 protests and general strike that welled out of Parisian universities and lycées and eventually engulfed the nation in turmoil to the point that President Charles de Gaulle briefly fled the country. Though Allen here rightly suggests that "The Death" did not arrive like a thunderclap and promptly upend the conventional readings of authorship, his account does suggest that our understanding of Barthes's text should be grounded in an understanding of the larger cultural circumstances that prompted the May Events. Because "The Death" is a polemic, with a palpably revolutionary agenda, the temptation to yoke it to the revolutionary agendas stirred in the May Events has proven irresistible to many scholars and critics, even though *Aspen 5+6* was published well before the first substantial stirrings of the Parisian student uprisings. This temptation has likely driven many of the misplacements of Barthes's text in time, even though—assuming Rylance writes accurately on this point—Barthes was "increasingly out of sympathy with the younger generation" (Rylance xvii).

Thanks to Nesbit’s earlier-mentioned clarity in “What Was an Author?” the true publication date of Barthes’s essay has been hiding in plain sight, yet scholars have now been misidentifying the date for decades. In his 1992 monograph *The Death and Return of the Author*, Burke acknowledges this phenomenon while both correcting *and* muddying the record:

Written in 1967—and not, as is often supposed, in mind of the student uprising—“The Death of the Author” was first published in France in 1968. [Note: Burke here offers a lengthy footnote referencing *Aspen*.] The year of *les événements*, however, was to suit the dramatic and revolutionary nature of Barthes’ essay admirably. [. . .] “The Death of the Author” has found a perfect setting against the background of May-time Paris in intellectual revolt. (20)

Burke’s account is admirable for directly untangling the confusion surrounding the publication date. But Burke’s correction of the record is followed by—of all things—a claim that regardless of the *facts* of the essay’s composition, it *feels* like it belongs among the May Events even though it was not published in France until roughly six months after these events. Thus, Burke here crafts a paragraph that simultaneously supports the true publication date, and the *feeling* that the essay is of another, later time. So, it seems, even those who know better still *feel* as though “The Death” arrived before its “proper” moment.

The most prominent recent example of this misdating phenomenon is Jane Gallop’s 2011 monograph *The Deaths of the Author*. After citing the Burke passage quoted in my preceding paragraph, Gallop writes,

Barthes’s essay was published in France in 1968, the year of the nationwide insurrection of students (and workers), and its tone seems perfectly to fit the publication date. Although actually written in 1967, [Gallop here offers an endnote that reads “Before appearing in French in 1968, ‘The Death of the Author’ in fact appeared in an American literary magazine *Aspen* nos. 5–6, in 1967.”] “The Death of the Author” conforms to our image of “1968”—which surely contributes to our sense of the manifesto as historic. (29)

But Gallop’s clear awareness of the correct publication date for “The Death” does not preclude her references to Barthes’s text as “the 1968 manifesto” (30, 32, 34, 42); “the notorious 1968 essay”; and “Barthes’s infamous little 1968 essay” (8). Early in her book, Gallop points out that critics discussing the idea of the death of the author “generally refer the reader to two articles—and by and large to only two articles—always the same two, which appeared within a year of each other, one by Roland Barthes in 1968 and the other by Michel Foucault in 1969” (2). Later, Gallop points out that Derrida’s elegiac essay in memory of Barthes, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” does not mention the “notorious 1968 essay” and speculates, “Perhaps this is because what in a United States context may be Barthes’s best-known essay

was not such an important text in the French context" (57). Thus, although "The Death" is Barthes's best-known work in the United States—but not in France—there is a tendency to give precedence to the 1968 date for the French publication at the expense of the initial US publication in 1967.

These many and repeated misplacings of the true publication date of "The Death" by literally dozens of scholars occur despite an entirely plausible explanation for the revolutionary tone of Barthes's writing that is well distant from the events of May 1968 in Paris.

So . . . if "The Death" is not a 1968 essay redolent with the specific cultural currents that sent France into near-revolution in May of that year, what, specifically, *is* the cultural context for Barthes's text? And does properly situating it in 1967 and within the confines of the odd and ambitious pages of *Aspen* magazine *matter*? The argument here, of course, is that this matters mightily. Although "The Death" is meant as a polemical and revolutionary statement, the revolutionary context of its production is that of an international artistic movement. The essay resonates more strongly with the context constructed by the immediately prior issues of *Aspen*, and by the surrounding work in *Aspen* 5+6.

Going forward, the challenge faced by scholars from the disciplines favoring this journal is one of de-emphasizing an understanding of "The Death" as a participant in a lengthy diachronic tussle over how literary composers compose, and instead seeing it in its synchronic moment, in a rhizomatic network with the other contributions to *Aspen* 5+6.⁶ Though Burke's 1995 edited collection *Authorship* does not strictly adhere to a chronological format, Burke's compilation nevertheless promotes the underlying notion of a fairly linear evolution of arguments about authors and authorship. In this diachronic model, in 1967, Barthes is intervening in a two-millennium-long conversation in which his essay was anticipated by (among others) Plato's *Ion*; Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry"; Edward Young's "Conjectures on Original Composition"; T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent"; and W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy." Further, Barthes's arguments are seen as prompting Foucault's "What Is an Author?" and significantly informing subsequent key works in feminist criticism, including Helene Cixous's "Castration or Decapitation" and Nancy K. Miller's "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader" (which opens with a sustained treatment of Barthes's essay). But seeing Barthes's essay within this model (which remains important) often comes at the expense of seeing it in its cultural moment.

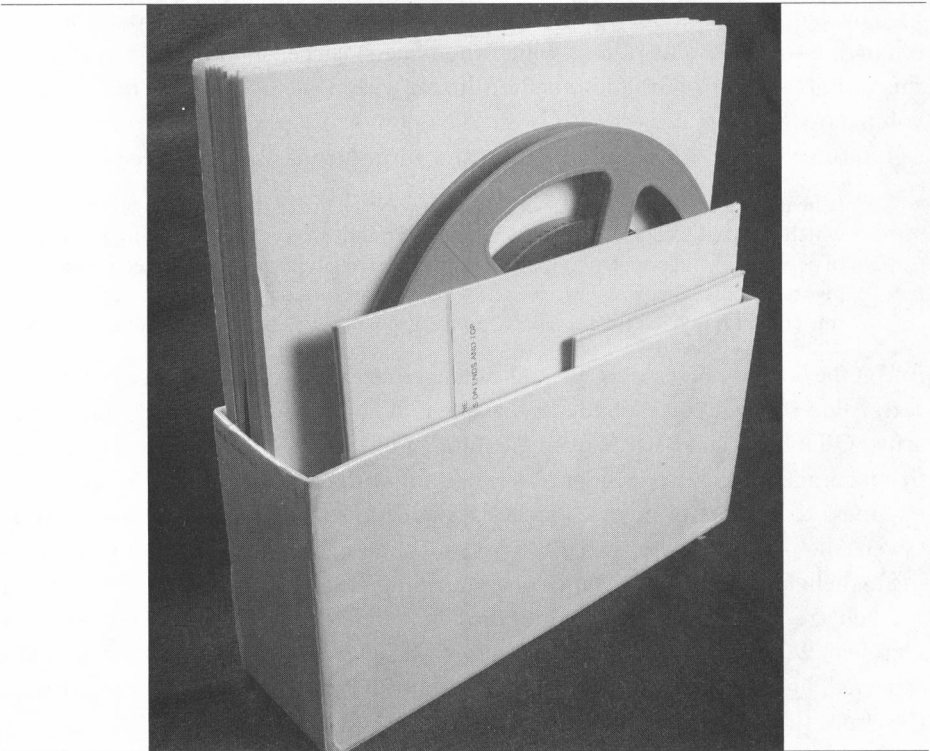
At the point of its publication in 1967, Barthes's work was a participant in a *pointedly* multimedia conversation about the artistic process and the relationships among artists and their audiences. It is challenging to fully represent the rhizomatic network found within the box that contained *Aspen* 5+6, but even a partial representation of this network offers opportunities to understand Barthes's text in a new light.

"The Death" is part of an expansive constellation of disparate texts with no necessary sequence. Interconnected to "The Death" within *Aspen* 5+6 are (among others) "Linoleum," a film by Rauschenberg; "Fontana Mix-Feed," a piercing electronic composition by Cage; Samuel Beckett's "Text for Nothing #8" (presented here on a flexi-disc phonograph recording); William S. Burroughs's "Excerpts from Nova Express" (also on a flexi-disc, read by Burroughs); Merce Cunningham's "Space, Time, and Dance"; and in a nod to the somewhat Dada spirit of *Aspen* 5+6, Marcel Duchamp's "The Creative Act" read by Duchamp.

To offer a better sense of how this network functions, I now turn to the specifics of *Aspen* 5+6 and the development of the network in which Barthes participated.

When issue editor Brian O'Doherty invited Roland Barthes to compose a text for a special "minimalism issue" of *Aspen*, he was inviting Barthes to publish in a magazine in a box that had dedicated its most recent issues to pop art and Marshall McLuhan. The varied contributors to what became a double issue of *Aspen* were a

Figure 1. *Aspen* 5+6, "The Minimalism Issue." Photograph by John Logie. Access to archival copies of *Aspen* courtesy of the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.



motley assemblage, but the group featured strong representation from international avant-garde artistic movements. In the introductory booklet for *Aspen* 5+6, O'Doherty invokes six movements that serve as prompts for the contents of the box: "Constructivism, Structuralism, Conceptualism, the 'tradition of paradoxical thinking,' objects, and 'between categories.'" As Gwen Allen, professor of art history, points out, the selection of minimalism as the issue's theme was itself a provocation, arriving as it did only months after a scathing treatment of minimalism in *Artforum* by art critic Michael Fried, titled "Art and Objecthood." Fried bemoans the way minimalist sculpture "*depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for him.*" (qtd. in Gwen Allen 55; original emphasis). "The Minimalism Issue" of *Aspen* required precisely the same kinds of interactivity Fried decries, including not only media that the reader/viewer/listener needed to place into appropriate machines (for example, phonographs, Super-8 film projectors), but also cut-and-paste projects and a poem by Dan Graham formally titled "Poem, March 1966," but more widely known as "Schema," that effectively required the reader to construct a functional poem based on a limited and self-referential series of prompts. This, then, is the true context for "The Death," and *not* the 1968 May uprising or the work of the *Tel Quel* circle. And this all becomes quite clear when Barthes is wrested from the Barthesians.

Indeed, Barthes's essay plays an arguably central role in both the development of *Aspen* 5+6 and the degree to which the issue(s) succeed(s) in drawing together the various strands of artistic rebellion found within the box. In her terrific 2011 volume titled *Artists' Magazines*, Gwen Allen points to *Aspen* 5+6 as having a special significance within *Aspen's* brief, varied, and adventurous run. She argues that

[t]he unparalleled significance of this issue of *Aspen* has to do not only with the way in which it crystallized the intersections between minimalism's phenomenological models of perception and poststructuralist investigations of language—an intersection that was pivotal for the emerging practice of conceptual art—but also with the implications of this convergence for the social and political possibilities of both art and media. (55)

And at the heart of this especially significant issue of *Aspen*—Allen argues—is Barthes's text. Allen secured correspondence between "The Minimalism Issue" editor (and artist) O'Doherty and Barthes from the summer of 1967 in which O'Doherty appears to encourage Barthes to consider experimenting with format in keeping with *Aspen's* openness to a range of media. Barthes's August 10, 1967, reply—as translated by Gwen Allen—is that "your project holds much interest for me, but I for one hold a *radical* belief in writing and cannot imagine doing anything but writing." According to Allen's research, when Barthes sent the completed text, he included a note—dated October 29, 1967—apologizing because "The Death" was briefer than perhaps expected, but also expressing his hope that it would be "in sufficient harmony with the issue" (qtd. in Gwen Allen 57).

Gwen Allen observes that “The Death” both exists because of and was calibrated for the specifics of O’Doherty’s vision for “The Minimalism Issue” of *Aspen*:

Commissioned specifically for *Aspen* 5+6, Barthes’s famous essay *must be understood as a deeply site-specific piece of writing*, informed by and meant to be read alongside visual art, music, performances, and texts. (57; emphasis added)

Allen is clear here that she understands “The Death” to have been specifically commissioned for *Aspen*, but there is a contrasting account offered in art historian Alex Alberro’s brief 2001 piece “Inside the White Box” for *Artforum*. Alberro first establishes that the composing process for *Aspen* 5+6 was unusual for the time:

O’Doherty placed his cast of characters in a strange dialogue with one another. Replete with countless self-references, the intricate network of correspondences woven by the box’s players spread its web across time and space, creating a dense circuit of interrelated information. (170)

Though this was likely true of many of the contributors to the issue, there is no evidence that Barthes participated in this correspondence network. According to Alberro, his path appears to have been much more direct:

O’Doherty recalls that Barthes, whose work he had followed in the *Evergreen Review*, was teaching in Philadelphia year [sic]: “So I invited him up to New York to explain what we were doing, and he told me that he had a short piece that would be appropriate. About three weeks later he sent ‘The Death of the Author.’ This was its first publication. I’ve always felt bad that we were never able to pay him the \$300 promised.” Barthes also deferred to Mallarmé in this seminal essay, as he deflated the array of overpowering personalities by insisting that “it is language that speaks, not the author.” (Alberro 170)

This account strongly suggests that Barthes had much of “The Death” in hand at the point that O’Doherty first contacted him about participating in the project. In this account, Barthes is able to lightly adapt an existing essay, probably by adding material on Stéphane Mallarmé in order to resonate with *Aspen* 5+6’s dedication to the French symbolist poet.

But in 2009, American studies PhD candidate Maarten Van Gageldonk—then completing a master’s thesis on *Aspen*—contacted O’Doherty to learn about his thought processes leading up to “The Minimalism Issue.” O’Doherty first speaks directly to the revolutionary spirit at the heart of the issue:

I was laser-focused. I knew exactly what the issue should be: a summary of my[self] and some of my colleagues and [. . .] Modernism’s ancestors as a platform on which I perched my colleagues and myself. [. . .] I was aware, perhaps before the others, that we were inserting a hinge into history on which it would turn. (qtd. in Van Gageldonk 57)

This account is, perhaps, somewhat self-serving. O’Doherty is describing himself in heroic terms, setting the agenda for a revolutionary document. There is irony

in O'Doherty here casting himself as a sort of Romantic hero, setting in motion the production of a body of texts, one of which will challenge precisely this sort of Romanticism over the following decades.

O'Doherty's 2009 email exchange with Van Gageldonk also suggests that O'Doherty participated in something of a give-and-take with Barthes that likely influenced Barthes's writing to at least *some* degree. O'Doherty phrases it this way:

I should say that for me new pastures had opened when I realized that art need not, was not, about myself [*sic*]. The idea of finding yourself and making art from that fiction was not something I wanted to pursue. It reeked of romantic agony, and was not for me. All of us at the time were very much against emotional excess. Barthes responded very well to the ideas I put forth, said, "I may have something for you" or some such phrase. In time, "[The] Death of the Author" arrived. I saw it as high[ly] explosive. [I] was thrilled to get what I knew was game-changing and historic. (qtd. in Van Gageldonk 57; quotation marks added by Van Gageldonk)

O'Doherty's 2009 account presents a "laser-focused" O'Doherty "putting forth" ideas that—at root—challenge Romantic constructions of art and artistry. Barthes here is cast as "responding" strongly to O'Doherty's agenda, albeit with an ambiguous phrase ("I may have something for you") that can reasonably be interpreted to mean "I have a largely completed text that might work for your project" or "I may be able to compose something for your project" or some blend of the two.

It is no slight to O'Doherty to suggest that his memories of the circumstances of Barthes's composition of "The Death" may have shifted over time. Taking these accounts together, the essay swings on an array of pendulums. Although in Alberro's account it seems likely that "The Death" was largely composed prior to Barthes's first discussions with O'Doherty, Van Gageldonk's correspondence with O'Doherty contains O'Doherty's assertions that Barthes was responding to "the ideas I had put forth" . . . though O'Doherty's recalling Barthes as having said something like "I may have something for you" suggests that elements of the essay may have been already composed at the time of Barthes's meeting with O'Doherty. Then there is the unsettled question of how long Barthes labored over the project. In O'Doherty's 2001 account, "three weeks" after an initial meeting, the essay shows up. But Gwen Allen's record of the correspondence between Barthes and O'Doherty suggests a longer gestation process, with Barthes in August 1967 ultimately insisting on a written composition after considering—apparently for some time—O'Doherty's encouragement to consider alternative media (O'Doherty had begun editing *Aspen* 5+6 in the summer of 1966, and the issue became a double issue in part because it was both late and over-budget). Gwen Allen's research pegs the completion of the essay to October 29, 1967, meaning that *Aspen* 5+6 could only have been published in November or December of that year. Also, Gwen Allen's report of Barthes's apparent apology for the brevity of "The Death" strongly implies that Barthes composed the

piece specifically for *Aspen*. Had Barthes simply lightly adapted a piece he already had in hand, its length probably would have been a point of discussion with O'Doherty, or indeed he could have simply shown O'Doherty the piece at their initial meeting. Barthes's apologetic note suggests that both Barthes and O'Doherty had discussed or envisioned a longer contribution.

How it occurred to O'Doherty to pursue Barthes in the first place is never adequately explained. In Alberro's article, O'Doherty states that he had been "following" Barthes's writings in the *Evergreen Review*. Although *Evergreen Review* published a translation of a Barthes essay on Alain Robbe-Grillet in 1958, that was the end of it. There were no "writings" by Barthes for O'Doherty to "follow." It seems unlikely that this one piece on Robbe-Grillet could have made such an impression on O'Doherty that Barthes was one of his top-of-mind choices for *Aspen* 5+6 nine years later.

There is at least one alternative possibility, in which O'Doherty would likely not have been the primary figure identifying Barthes as a worthy participant. As George Wasserman accurately reports in his 1981 book *Roland Barthes*,

Until 1967 only one of Barthes's books had been translated into English (*On Racine*), but in that year translations of *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology* appeared, and Barthes's reputation (no doubt as a Structuralist) spread widely. (21)

The UK edition of *Writing Degree Zero* appeared in 1967, but the US edition was published in 1968 by Hill and Wang, with a preface by Susan Sontag. The content and tone of Sontag's introduction make clear that she is assuming the task of introducing Barthes to many of her readers. In one striking passage, Sontag places Barthes in heady company:

Karl Kraus, T. W. Adorno, and Kenneth Burke come to mind as other examples of this rare breed of intellectual virtuoso, while McLuhan suggests the risks of radical unevenness of quality and judgment incurred with this magnitude of intellectual appetite and ambition. [. . .] I would argue that Barthes is the most consistently intelligent, important, and useful critic—stretching that term—to have emerged anywhere in the last fifteen years. (vii)

It is implicitly clear throughout Sontag's preface that she has been reading Barthes in French, and she directly states that she regards this English translation as "long overdue" (vii). Sontag's championing of Barthes in this preface is anticipated by her multiple references to Barthes in her 1966 collection of essays *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, which includes essays she had published in various magazines and journals—including *Evergreen Review*—between 1961 to 1966.

"The Death" appears in *Aspen* 5+6 as one of three essays in a square booklet, the other two being George Kubler's "Style and the Representation of Historical Time" and Sontag's "The Aesthetics of Silence." It seems clear that in 1967, Sontag

was Barthes's most prominent advocate in the United States. We have O'Doherty's somewhat dubious account of how he became aware of Barthes's work, and we have Sontag's repeated published invocations of Barthes's work in a series of essays that were then collected in an immensely popular book among artists and other intelligentsia of the time, published the year before O'Doherty began editing *Aspen* 5+6. At this late date, probably no one can accurately reconstruct the particular means by which Sontag and Barthes came to be invited to join O'Doherty's *Aspen* project, so I here invite readers to unsheathe their Occam's razors to cut and pare as they see fit.

Wherever that truth lies, O'Doherty almost certainly had a significant impact on the shape of Barthes's text. *Aspen* 5+6 was dedicated to the French symbolist poet Mallarmé. Although it is possible that O'Doherty's receipt of Barthes's essay prompted him to dedicate the issue to Mallarmé, O'Doherty appears to have arrived at his appreciation of Mallarmé independently of his engagement with Barthes's writings. O'Doherty's appreciation of Mallarmé was clearly pronounced. In Alberro's account, Mallarmé's poetics are top-of-mind for O'Doherty throughout the conceptualization and editing of *Aspen* 5+6:

O'Doherty's aim, as he wrote in the volume (under the pseudonym Sigmund Bode), was "to construe a situation in which persons, things, abstractions, become simply nouns and are thus potentially objectified." The sentiment again echoed that of Mallarmé, whose promotion of an excess of meaning (and the difficulty attendant on such excess) went hand in hand in his [Mallarmé's] signal work "Un Coup de des jamais n'abolira le hazard" with the reader able to take in two pages of the poem simultaneously. (170)

And however Barthes came to be involved with *Aspen*, it is clear that "The Death" deviates significantly from the more traditional scholarly writing Barthes was doing at the time. By 1967, Barthes's focus was narrowing in on the writer addressed in the opening moves of "The Death," Honoré de Balzac and his 1830 novella *Sarrasine*. As Wasserman writes, "by 1968 in his seminar at the École Pratique [Barthes] was already engaged in the analysis of Balzac's 'Sarrasine'" (21). This interest in Balzac's novella would eventually lead Barthes to compose 1970's *S/Z*, so the brief treatment of Balzac's novella in "The Death" is no passing fancy for Barthes. Indeed, it is Barthes in the process of discovering the object of his next few years of study. But Barthes soon turns to the object of O'Doherty's dedication, Mallarmé.

The nature of Barthes's attention to the work of Mallarmé really clarifies the degree to which "The Death" is indeed—as Gwen Allen writes—a highly site-specific piece of writing. Barthes's treatment of Mallarmé—though generous—is sandwiched between the more sustained section on Balzac's *Sarrasine* and one on Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Although other writers are also referenced in "The Death," Barthes does so only fleetingly. In the cases of Balzac's and Proust's works, Barthes's discussions are specific and reference both particular characters and the

plots. Barthes does not address the specifics of Mallarmé's work, choosing instead to make a broader case for his significance. He praises Mallarmé in the following terms:

Though the Author's empire is still very powerful (recent criticism has often merely consolidated it), it is evident that for a long time now certain writers have attempted to topple it. In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it; for Mallarmé, as for us, it is language which speaks, not the author: to write is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality—never to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic novelist—that point where language alone acts, "performs," and not "oneself": Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the reader). ("The Death")

Barthes here describes Mallarmé's writing as "reach[ing] [. . .] that point where language [. . .] 'performs,'" thereby "restor[ing] the status of the reader." Mallarmé is perhaps an odd choice to serve as the anchor for one of the most theoretically rich passages in Barthes's text. Mallarmé is, after all, a *poet* whose compositional practices are arguably somewhat removed from the conventional practices of authorship that lie in Barthes's crosshairs. But Barthes needs Mallarmé's celebration of language itself (at the expense of privileging authors) to set the stage for Barthes's ultimate turn toward the reader. And this turn toward the reader is *especially* necessary within the *Aspen* 5+6 box because the various texts within have no necessary order and no necessary connections to one another. They are a loose aggregation of texts within contrasting media, presented to *Aspen's* readers to assemble, disassemble, and reassemble.

Barthes's status as—at least to some degree—an engaged participant in the *Aspen* 5+6 project offers a new lens with which to view key passages from "The Death." For example, Barthes's famous passage critiquing the notion of an "Author-God" delivering messages takes on new resonances when the essay is seen in the context of its publication:

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. ("The Death")

Literary scholars and critics have, for years, been attracted to the idea in Barthes's parentheses, but reading "The Death" in its specific context reveals this passage to be very much about the *space* of writing. The notion that "a text does not consist of a line of words" is itself powerful, but in its initial presentation, Barthes's argument was dramatically underscored by the pointedly alinear body of texts within the *Aspen* 5+6 box. *Aspen* 5+6 is *itself* "a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing."

Barthes goes on to contrast linear, “single-meaning” writings with a more spatially expansive and permeable model:

In a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, “threaded” (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. (“The Death”)

When abstracted from its original context, this passage seems to be directed at the nature of textual meaning and the limits of interpretation. But within *Aspen* 5+6, it is apparent that Barthes is also emphasizing how much *space* matters. When he writes “there is no underlying ground,” he does so in the context of an array of texts that are—quite literally—*unbound*. In the absence of binding, Barthes encourages the reader to thread together both the contents of *Aspen* 5+6, and indeed, of *all* writing. As Van Gageldonk observes, “Barthes’ abandonment of the author-centered universe resounds throughout the issue, inviting readers to find their own possible parallels among the both temporally and spatially disparate parts” (59).

Barthes’s notion of “multiple writings” means, in part, something like M. M. Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*. Barthes’s thinking was likely informed by Julia Kristeva’s work on Bakhtin in Barthes’s 1966 seminar. Barthes would go on to champion Kristeva’s scholarship, crediting her for “introduc[ing Bakhtin] to us” (qtd. in Fletcher 240). When readers encounter “The Death” in collections of literary criticism, this and similar connections will likely be foremost. And these associations, while productive, are necessarily complemented and extended by the resonances that become available when Barthes’s critical passage on the reader is read within the context of its publication. In this passage, Barthes begins by addressing the familiar gap in knowledge between the reader or viewer of a classic tragedy and the participants in the play, but as the passage unspools, Barthes shakes free of the tragic frame to address writing in its broadest senses:

[T]here is someone who understands each word in its duplicity, and understands further, one might say, the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him: this someone is precisely the reader (or here the spectator). In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted. (“The Death”)

Indeed, *Aspen* 5+6 is overtly "a text consist[ing] of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation." Barthes's claim that the reader is "that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted" appeared as one of twenty-eight contributions to "The Minimalism Issue" of *Aspen*, and among the other twenty-seven were flexi-disc records, films, and especially notable for Barthes's argument, a sculpture by Tony Smith titled "The Maze." Within the *Aspen* box, readers (spectators?) were invited to piece together "The Maze." So, too, does Barthes's essay invite—even *demand*—recognition that readers actively participate in the construction of his essay, of *Aspen* 5+6, and of all texts. While Barthes's work is rightly regarded as revolutionary in spirit, the revolution in which Barthes was participating was an *artistic* revolution rather than a specifically political revolution. Barthes was knowingly joining with a generation of artists whose work made more overt demands on readers, viewers, listeners, and audience members, repositioning audiences as active participants in the works, sometimes demanding of their audiences that they, too, must join in the act of composition. And this act of participatory composition involves not only engaging with Barthes's essay but also with *all* of the work within *Aspen* 5+6. As art scholar Mary Ruth Walsh argues in a 2003 article,

The ingenuity of the box is such that to fasten or isolate one artwork or project is to rearrange the system of relationships within its components. Perspectives shift, analogies touch, chimeras appear and disappear. The dense, provocative networks of overlaid systems are so rich and complex that they are self-supporting. (46)

Thus, the "birth of the reader" Barthes invokes in his final sentence resonates with all similar births prompted by the *Aspen* 5+6 network as subscribers and purchasers of the magazine in a box worked to piece this multimedia, rhizomatic network *together*.

Today, readers are often presented "The Death" and Foucault's "What Is an Author?" as literary essays, yet neither was ever quite that. Barthes's piece was an essay, to be sure, but one calibrated to the specific context and artistic culture that *Aspen* cultivated over the course of its preceding four issues. Foucault's piece was a lecture, and it, too, is routinely presented without adequate reference to the specificity of its context. As Gallop rightly points out,

The French publication of "What is an Author?" includes not just Foucault's paper but also the discussion that followed the lecture. The bulk of the discussion is a long discussion by Lucien Goldmann and Foucault's answer to that question. Goldmann focuses on the death of the author, despite its being a rather minor point of the lecture. [. . .] The transcription of the session shows Foucault clearly frustrated by this response to his lecture. In his reply to Goldmann, Foucault insists that the theme of the author's death is not his. (180)

In the case of “What Is an Author?” the challenge at hand is in part one of translation. Scholars who do not understand French are screened from a full understanding of the context, and thereby, the text. But in the case of “The Death,” no such obstacles exist. Despite the misplaced emphasis on the 1968 French publication date, the urtext is, in this case, the English text. Howard’s translation of Barthes in *Aspen* 5+6 is—unequivocally—primary. In terms of “The Death” in publication, Barthes’s own French text is both chronologically and contextually secondary.

The challenge we now face is one of unteaching “The Death” as a literary essay and of re-teaching it as a participant in a collection of artistic manifestos and provocations. Strong work from scholars such as Gwen Allen and Maarten Van Gageldonk can be tremendously helpful here. One obvious step that instructors assigning Barthes’s essay should take is to assign *only* the version now online at UbuWeb. UbuWeb’s *Aspen* archive presents meticulously prepared digital facsimiles of the contents of the whole of the magazine’s brief run, including MP3 files of the sound recordings and QuickTime renditions of the films, four of which were included in the minimalism issue. My further recommendation is that instructors *not* link directly to “The Death” but instead to the table of contents for issue 5+6 (<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html>), thereby ensuring that the next generation of readers of Barthes’s essay will have a sharpened sense of how he was situating himself relative to the other participants in the aggregation of art movements that coalesced under the *Aspen* umbrella. Similarly, scholarly citations to the essay *should* be to this online edition. It is the best available representation of the first published version of Barthes’s text (print and other copies are rare and prohibitively expensive when they can be located).⁷

In short, when “The Death” is referenced, assigned, or invoked, scholars need to present it and process it within its specific context. The radicalism of *Aspen*’s artistic strategies needs to be recovered, and Barthes’s active participation in these iconoclastic gestures needs to be foregrounded in our discussions of his essay. Doing so allows us to see, for example, that the text is not—as several contemporary scholars have argued—anticipatory of patterns of authorship in networked multimedia. Barthes’s essay *was* and *is* networked multimedia. Further, we do well to understand this 1967 work as one with no direct connection to the May Events of Paris 1968, and we err when this connection is enforced to the exclusion of the essay’s overt connections within the *Aspen* network. Understanding “The Death” in context has the potential to prompt a productive reexamination of the ways in which similarly nonstandard texts have been normalized as they have been anthologized. Engaging with Barthes’s text as part of *Aspen* 5+6 illuminates the degree to which the adventurousness and defiance of the 5+6 composers has usually been excluded from reprintings and re-presentations of “The Death.” Because Barthes’s essay is now informing many scholars’ approaches to reimagining the “author” at the center of US copyright laws, the interlinking nodes within the *Aspen* network all participate

to a degree in this challenge to the simplified, stabilized constructions of authorship within legal discourse. Further, we do well to understand that although Barthes's essay is now housed within serious-minded scholarly anthologies that position his writing within a broader literary critical tradition, these positions strip the essay of the sense of play with the reader that becomes intuitively clear when Barthes is presented in tandem with the *Aspen* network. His essay both shaped and was shaped by its context in *Aspen* 5+6.

Once again, we must reverse its myth. The birth of an understanding of "The Death of the Author" as a strongly site-specific, richly networked artistic provocation from the fall of 1967 must be ransomed by the death of understanding the work as a 1968 literary essay.

NOTES

1. Special issue editors Rebecca Moore Howard and Krista Kennedy deserve particular thanks for their constructive and insightful suggestions as I developed this article. As my argument will address the degree to which no text is fully isolated from the circumstances of its production, it is especially appropriate that their contributions be formally acknowledged here.

2. I draw the terms *solitary*, *originary*, and *proprietary* from Woodmansee's work, particularly her 1992 essay "On the Author Effect" for the *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*, which was reprinted as the 1994 edited collection *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*, published as part of the Post-Contemporary Interventions series edited by Stanley Fish and Frederic Jameson.

3. Woodmansee and Jaszi extended these arguments in this journal in a 1995 article, "The Law of Texts: Copyright in the Academy" which does not cite Barthes directly but builds on their previously cited essay.

4. Because of space limitations, additional images included in the author-final draft of this article could not be reproduced in this issue of *CE*. For interested parties, that draft and those images may be found at the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy (<http://conservancy.umn.edu>).

5. Coincidentally, the scholar *Gwen Allen* is referenced later. For this reason, I will refer to each by first and last name a bit more than I otherwise might, and especially in those spaces where keeping track of the Allens is critical to my argument. Though cumbersome, this at least ensures that the two will remain clear in readers'—and my own—minds.

6. I am particularly grateful to special issue coeditor Krista Kennedy for pointing out that the aspen tree is a rhizome, and that this fact harmonizes nicely with my argument.

7. Unless a nearby rare-book room or special collection has the text, in which case, go look at the thing. But this can be a heartbreaking experience. The University of Minnesota's copy of *Aspen* 5+6 was treated like any other "magazine," meaning the box's clean white surface is now covered in various stickers and stamps, including—at the time of my arrival—a large manila pocket for the card recording the names of those who checked out the magazine when it was part of the circulating collection. Worse yet, the booklet containing the Barthes essay had been filched. Those who wish to cling to a 1968 dating for "The Death" can take some solace from a red intake stamp that suggests that *Aspen* 5+6—though clearly dated "Fall-Winter 1967"—did not arrive at the University of Minnesota's library until March 12, 1968. Whether this reflects a general sluggishness in the mailing of the magazine or a particular tardiness for the university's copy is impossible to know. That said, my argument is not really about when Barthes's text became available to its readers. It is about the specific circumstances in which he and the *Aspen* 5+6 network composed their works, and the importance of distinguishing between this context and the May Events context that has erroneously been attached to Barthes's essay.

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