



**Silvija Jestrović**

***Performances of Authorial Presence and Absence: The Author Dies Hard (2020)***

To what extent did the author really die when Roland Barthes wrote his famous essay in 1967, and do all authors die the same death? What is the author's present status as neither source of unquestioned authority nor obsolete figure? What might it mean to 'feel the presence of the author' in contemporary artworks and culture?

In this oral introduction, Silvija Jestrović guides us through her forthcoming *Performances of Authorial Presence and Absence: The Author Dies Hard* (London: Palgrave 2020) to explain how she arrived at new understandings of how the author is constructed as a performative figure in the contemporary moment, and how that construction is always a dramaturgy – and thus a political and ethical process, as well as an aesthetic one.

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**[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?**

*Performances of Authorial Presence and Absence: The Author Dies Hard*. I call it *The Author Dies Hard*. It's a bit of a mouthful to say the whole thing.

**[00:00:28] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?**

I came to writing this book from a need to return a little bit more to the text, and to some form of analysis of not only dramatic text but all sorts of texts – including performance texts, with all the limitations that this term brings. It really connects to my earlier work, to the work that my PhD was on and my first book – which was *Theatre of Estrangement: Theory, Practice, Ideology* – where I dealt with, basically, making the familiar strange in theatre and with lots of theory of Russian formalists and German avant-garde, especially Brecht, a little bit of Czech structuralism. But it was really exploring the relationship between form and content, and when does form become political, in a sense. So even though some of the tools that I put in my bag during this first project have stayed in my bag and been used, but for a long time I was doing something else, in a way: I was focusing on questions of exile, I was focusing a lot on things that were happening in Yugoslavia, performances of that type – more of a Performance Studies approach. And somehow I was craving some kind of return to the text and this is how this book came about.

Those things are never quite straightforward: 'how' and 'why'. I suppose I also like to read fiction or see things where I can sense the presence of the author. This is what I enjoy lately. And also, the questions that have always remained important to me are the ethical, political questions: 'Where is the political agency of the author?', 'Where is the political agency of the recipient?' So I suppose these were the various strains that led me to this book.

**[00:02:46] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?**

The book looks at instances of authorial presence and absence in text and performance. It includes a variety of examples, mainly from theatre and performance, but also from literary works and a little bit of film. So it's very eclectic in that sense. And it explores: 'What is this author?', 'What is this figure?' Obviously it takes, as a point of departure, the Western construction of the author. And it takes as a point of departure Roland Barthes' famous provocation of *The Death of the Author*. So this is where it starts: it starts with *The Death of the Author*. And it kind of starts with Barthes' death as well because



there is this book, *The Seventh Function of Language*, which actually opens with Barthes being about to be hit by a van. And this is how I decided to kind of go about the opening of this.

So I'm exploring: 'What is this construction?', 'Who constructs the author?', 'How is the author constructed?'. And in this process, it becomes quite interesting, quite fascinating, how the authors become kind of – sometimes it's a projection of a collective desire for example, in a certain context, in a certain culture. At other times it's a bit of a combination, especially in Romanticism. And I think in our times we see a very self-conscious author, the author also is making themselves participate very consciously in that sort of myth-making, if you wish. So I'm looking at various instances of this presence and absence – and what does it mean? And talking about how the author in these instances of presence and absence is actually a performative figure: there is a certain dramaturgy of their construction, there is a certain *mise en scène* of their appearance. And even going back to the past, going back to if you think of who would be the first author, not necessarily with this word being appropriate. But then, you know, you think of Homer for example, in the Western canon – I'm talking mainly about that – then you see that this figure is completely a construction, and that what came to us from this figure is actually the legacy of a number of performers who were performing the songs that the poet or the author had written. So the original author is actually a kind of myth, and there are layers and layers of others who have added their voices. And I think this author becomes a bit of a palimpsest in this process. So to me, I'm looking at the author as a figure that some sense is a very theatrical figure and sometimes literally so. And at other times, also as a figure that has a certain performativity. These words then reverberate – or these performances if the author is – I look at the term 'author' very broadly, also as an artist, as a maker of some kind.

And the main inquiry, I would say, is on three intertwined tracks. One is this aesthetic aspect that focuses on intertextuality: dialogues between authors, dialogues between the author and the audience, the recipient, the reader. The other aspect is a little bit ontological: sort of the presence, absence, disappearance [of the author], God as author, author as God, getting rid of the God and all of that. A little bit of that as well. But also one of my key interests is that sort of ethical, political aspect of what authorial presence means. So when we go back to Barthes and *The Death of The Author*, one of the first questions is: 'Do all the authors die the same death?' Because they are not born the same – do they die the same? Can we kill all the authors off in the same way? What about female authors? Authors who were traditionally, historically marginalised for various reasons of gender, ethnicity, race and other kinds of otherness that they might have? So when you open these questions it becomes quite interesting. And I think it allowed me in places – even though I'm looking at this Western construction of the author – to also look at it from another angle, to look at it more politically. So in that sense, when I talk about presence and absence of the author – I have a chapter on censorship which casts a completely, I think, different twist on the death of the author. Because sometimes these instances of censorship historically have led to actual deaths of authors that are directly related. At other times you know, it's the excessive presence of the author that protects the author from being disappeared. And then also it calls for something else, because the other part of Barthes' proposition is this rebirth of the reader, that everything is in the reader and the recipient. And also in Theatre and Performance Studies, we all know how the meaning is completed in the process, in the communication – it's always so. But then this also puts a certain responsibility on the recipient. So whether we are literally participating in something or whether we are seemingly passively sitting, listening, reading, there is a certain responsibility of how we construct this author or how we deconstruct this author in the public sphere. So it allowed me to open some ethical questions, political questions as well.

### **[00:08:47] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?**

It's a very eclectic book, I think. I think that this concept of the author as a performative figure is an interesting one. And it might allow us to think about: who is behind the work, for whom, how this communicates? How is this persona behind the word constructed in terms that are more political, I would say? I think there are certain conceptual dimensions it contributes to the field. So looking at how the author is constructed, looking at the performativity – I think these sort of concepts of theatricality



and performativity of the author haven't been so prevalent in the discourse. What it also contributes, I think, is a certain – I don't think this is even a methodology, but it's certainly eclectic associative thinking. So that maybe, even if we are in the scholarly kind of playing field, we don't necessarily always need to think very linearly. It doesn't always have to be very sort of straightforward. So, I think it offers a bit of free thinking about these topics without, I hope, being too flippant or being too whimsical – although it is a little bit whimsical. So I suppose that it's certain conceptual frameworks that it opens, especially around these questions of authorship, but not in legal terms so much. But really the construction of the author, the communication process basically, its aesthetics, its politics, its layers that are both historical and synchronic. So I think this is, maybe, one of its main contributions. And I do think it's because the topic is such that you could – I made my choices that I thought were appropriate, but I think you can choose any other, or a range of other case studies. You might have similar kinds of outcomes, or slightly different ones. So I think it's also inviting further questions, it's not a closed book. I think no book is exactly a closed book, but you know some things are more sort of – even some of the things I've previously done, books or essays, you know, I think: 'Okay, this is it, I said what I had to say – it's not closed forever but it's closed for me'. Whereas this is really open for me as much as for anyone else.

### **[00:11:40] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?**

It opens with quite a long introductory chapter which I think, I hope, lays out these key questions that I have just shared and gives some little snippets of examples of how we work through these questions. I think it opens certain theoretical sort of frameworks, through which we are going to look at the death and resurrection of the author. Because one of the key arguments actually is the need for the resurrection of the author. We cannot just kill the author off. Not because we need to look at psychology, biography very deeply and then explain everything through it in that sort of old-fashioned sense. But that we need – because it has to do with the text and context, with the relationship between the work and the context, and this authorial figure is part of this context. So I think I make the argument for why this inquiry into the authorial presence and absence in the text, why death and resurrection. And along these aesthetic, ontological, political lines, I bring some key theorists, although they are the point of departure for something else. And then also trying to answer: 'Why are we looking at this through the lens of theatre and performance predominantly?' Even though it is a little bit mixed – there is a bit of literary theory, there are other things in there, critical theory – but predominantly it is a theatre and performance, in my view, approach. So this is quite a substantial introduction and I chose to do it through, I hope, examples that are in some ways vivid. So there is this book called, a novel called *The Seventh Function of Language* by a French author, [Laurent] Binet. And this is one of the works I play very much with in the introduction, because he starts with Roland Barthes and his death and this alleged seventh function of language. A little bit like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* assuming that there is a lost part of the poetics that's about comedy, this one assumes that there are six functions of language, that one of my favourite Russian formalists Roman Jakobson has conceptualised. But Binet's presumption is that there is the seventh one that can control, actually, the communication process. So the one in control – the seventh function of language – would have absolute control of how things are taken up, that they're saying or doing. So I like to start – I used a lot of this, I played a lot with this in trying to explain, to map what my conceptual playing field would be. And also looking at authors like Borges, for example, who are very intertextual, who are very much also inquiring: 'What does it mean to be an author?', 'What does it mean to read?', 'What does it mean to write?' And then all the way to Tim Crouch – and of course, how could one omit a play called *The Author* when writing about the author? So another very stern provocation to us, which also involves the recipient very much, responsibility. So it allowed me, through these snippets of examples, I think it allowed me to position where the things in the book would be.

Then I realised in the process of writing that I needed to historicise the author a bit, and I thought it would be a very short thing but it actually ended up being a whole quite substantial second chapter. And there I look at some sort of key historical points in the formation of the Western author. So pre-print, so that's obviously Homer and the Greeks and actually with the Greeks, you have some of the first resurrections of the author, in Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, where he brings up, when he resurrects Aeschylus and Euripides for a boxing match – who is a better poet. And to the Middle Ages, where the



author was anonymous, but then there was a tactile relationship with the work in writing and, you know, so the author was – the DNA was there, on the material. And then commedia dell'arte, which kind of throws all of this in the air in a different way. The other important part would be this sort of invention of print in the Renaissance: on the one hand, democratisation of the book, of culture, but on the other hand also that is the time when colonial conquest starts, so language, the book becomes also a tool of oppression. So looking at this. And then of course the Romantic author, who I think is the author that Barthes kills in the first place.

So it's that sort of notion of author, the muse, the – very much of a performative figure, that author is very self-conscious, very – Rousseau for example, very rock'n'roll, very kind of theatrical. [Which] you wouldn't think immediately when you think of the books only without the authors, without looking into the personality of the author. But this also then, this period also looks at the public sphere, to the emergence of the cultural public sphere, and I think it's also the emergence of the author as a public intellectual, of the author as an engaged public intellectual. So it's an incredibly rich and interesting period. And then again the question of female authors, that I think are there throughout, which then cast a different light on it all. So this historical chapter allowed me to look at some of the key things that I wanted to communicate from the intertextual and ontological to the political.

And so the introduction, the historical part, and then I have three case studies along these sort of lines: intellectual, ontological, political. So my intertextual is a third section called 'Resurrections'. So there's the introduction 'Death of the Author', then I have 'Births', and this is this historical part, and then 'Resurrections'. So it's all – it's not in the right chronological order, but anyway. And that third part has an intertextual chapter that uses Chekhov as a point of departure, but Chekhov as a performative figure and looks at various plays that deal with Chekhov, or not deal with Chekhov but have Chekhov as a character. Some very biographical, others very deconstructive. Then I look at Marina Abramović. It's my – another chapter in this section which because performance art has a different kind of ontology of presence, or different conceptualisation of presence, and she's a very interesting case because there is a lot of theatricality, especially towards the end. And there is still this claim that there is some kind of authentic and unmediated presence which becomes, which is a sort of a utopia. But I think her work – and even the title of that chapter is 'The Author is Present' paraphrasing her project *The Artist is Present* – I think her work gives a lot of material to think about these ontological dimensions of presence and absence. And performance art, I think, is again, brings a specific twist there and a paradox, I think, which is interesting to grapple with. And then there is this final chapter on censorship as a form of making the author absent and a form of a death of the author, in a sense. And the conclusion – I want to mention my conclusion because this is where Patti Smith appears – and I love Patti Smith. It's a little bit of a coda and I called it 'In Other Deaths', like *The Guardian's* [obituary section] 'Other Lives'. I found the work of Patti Smith particularly inspiring, especially her book *M Train*. And there are certain performances she describes, certain psycho-geographical performances, because she often visits graveyards of authors, poets, dramatists that she likes when she travels, and does some ritualistic things: sometimes she washes the gravestones, sometimes she reads by the graveside. And I think the way she dialogues with other authors, the way she brings sometimes dead authors together who haven't met in life I find quite fascinating. And so, yeah, it ends with Patti Smith.

### **[00:21:17] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?**

On some level, it was very enjoyable because this one is a bit different: the process was a bit different than I normally do. I always have a plan, as most of us probably have, and I thought I would stick to that plan, as always – and I think structurally this plan has probably stayed. But in writing some of this, especially that historical part which was a bit unpredictable, I didn't expect it to be such a – to be basically a whole section of the book. I remember another couple of colleagues of mine writing books at the same time, and sometimes we would exchange, you know, just our – sometimes we would moan, sometimes we would be happy with the amount of words we did in a day, it depends how it goes. And I remember one day saying: 'You know what, this is really exciting, I never know who is going to pop up in this book'. And we were drinking coffee and there was some Miley Cyrus song on the radio, and my friend said: 'Oh, maybe Miley Cyrus, you can put her in?' I said: 'Yeah, yeah.' I laughed it off. And





then I go to the chapter on Chekhov and I write about Dead Centre – I didn't write about Miley Cyrus really but the name is there because Dead Centre's *Chekhov's First Play* has this wrecking ball as a citation almost from, or at least an associative connection to, Miley Cyrus' video. So even Miley Cyrus is there! So I think this was the aspect that was the most enjoyable. That I was not sure who was going to appear. And then also I would go in certain places a little bit into authorial biographies. Not in any great sense, not as a claim that this has to be a way into the work. That would be very – you know, that has already been very much discussed, but there is a certain... I was looking at this notion that [Yury] Tynyanov, Svetlana Boym call 'biography as a literary fact' (1991). So biography becomes part of this construction of the work. So Marina Abramović is also very good example of it, especially her later work. So these explorations are also very interesting. What was hard was also that I think I can never finish anything unless I feel extreme pressure. So when there was a moment of extreme pressure, then I could see that this was going to be finished. And that was also very hard because there are periods that were very, very exhausting in writing this, and frustrating. On the other hand, there is something when you have to write something, when you are writing intensively that writing becomes a bit different, or things open. So I find that, I don't know, maybe all of all of us have done that, you know, you go to a conference and then you write a paper in the hotel room until dawn. And I've done that many times but even though it's very risky and even though it's not always polished enough, sometimes in this intensity, this craziness of such an intense, such a strenuous process, some interesting things open that wouldn't have opened otherwise. So these are the good sides of this experience, but there are also very exhausting sides there. And then also, because I had some other, a few other things planned to put in: I had some Schlingensiefel, I wanted to put in some Christoph Schlingensiefel and you know he had this *Church of Fear*, this performance where he would appear and he was actually dying of cancer. And somehow, even though I'd written elsewhere a little bit about this, I just couldn't – I just didn't want to go actually into the dark side of this. I don't know, it sounds maybe a little bonkers, but I think when you – there was a point when I thought: 'Uff this is, I just–' And I chose the whimsical side. So that was a kind of a difficulty of a strange sort.

#### **[00:25:48] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?**

There are a lot of places where I think: 'Oh, this is nice!', and then there are a lot of places [where I go]: 'Oh god!'. You know: 'I wish this sentence was better', 'I could have said more here.' You know. I like the conclusion, maybe because of Patti Smith. And what I like the most probably are bits where – there is a bit maybe from my own dramaturgical playwriting background – I like when there is some kind of a punchline or when there is some kind of a passage that has a bit of a twist. So those things I like. So perhaps one of the things that I like is the passage at the end of this chapter about the author in the Renaissance. And there is a subchapter called 'Shakespeare the Coloniser' and then there is the ending of it which plays with the textual machine and it looks at the author as coloniser, and I think that's written in an interesting way.

Transcription by Saskia Craft-Stanley & Flora Pitrolo

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Video available at [www.auralia.space/library1-silvijajestrovic/](http://www.auralia.space/library1-silvijajestrovic/).



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