

Sign Study 2

“The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text”

In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes argues that the “cult of the Author” is a bankrupt tradition that is giving way to a new kind of writing. Meaning cannot be explained, controlled, or guaranteed by the author’s life, psychology, or stated intentions. Furthermore, the “death of the author” is linked to the “birth of the reader,” as literature becomes an open network of quotations, references, and potential uses. Likewise, Barthes’s essay “From Work to Text” describes the breakdown of the closed, perfect “work” and the rise of the open, permeable, networked “text.”

Both essays describe a range of aesthetic values that can be expressed through art, design, and typography in endless ways. In place of values such as fixed, closed, complete, authoritative, centered, and deep, Barthes embraces values such as unfinished, open, decentered, marginal, plural, and shallow.

It’s easy tempting to interpret this shift in values in either romantic or nihilistic terms. Romantic: “*There is no meaning, just the ineffable mysteries of personal expression.*” Nihilistic: “*There is no meaning, and therefore no morality, no social responsibility, no concern for the future.*” Instead, Barthes argues that meaning is everywhere. Meaning is constantly being produced, and it is being produced by everyone. Meaning is social, not private, personal, or mystical.

Design challenge: How to employ these aesthetic values in a manner that exposes, explores, or engages their social character.

Project

Text: Find an Amazon page for a book that interests you. Look for a book with rich data. (Thesis students: choose a book relevant to your thesis research, such *Cradle to Cradle*, *Air Guitar*, *Designing Design*, etc.) For example, the page for Roland Barthes’s book *Image/Music/Text* contains dozens of different evaluations of the book from a variety of “readers,” including experts, amateurs, and automated processes. Create a poster using some of data about the book of your choice. Use typography in a beautiful, purposeful, and structured way. You may choose to use visual strategies to convey the openness and unfinished character of the Amazon “text,” but don’t just “make a mess.” Don’t try to include all the data. Study the rich range of data and think about what you want to say or do with it.

Following are two approaches you might take:

- Set up a contrast/conflict between expert versus amateur, human versus machine, or individual versus social.
- Look at how this Amazon entry connects this one book to other books and/or products.

Format: 18 x 24.