

# Rethinking Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in Contemporary Media

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## Abstract

This study explores the theoretical transition from structuralism to post-structuralism by examining the current digital system. It applies Roland Barthes's iconic 1967 concept, 'The Death of the Author', directly to modern internet culture. By combining structural linguistics with hyperreality theory, the paper investigates how online meaning is actively generated. It closely analyzes the role of Barthes's the 'scriptor' within automated web platform. The research specifically tracks this text transformation across music remixes, short videos, reels, and internet memes. The paper highlights the way corporate platform algorithms systematically tape messages from historical context. When origins disappear, online copies completely replace the original media. Basically, these apps give regular users the freedom to remix and reshare anything they see online. Because of this, everyday media consumers have become the actual writers of modern text."

**Keywords:** Critical Theory, Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author, Scriptor, Digital Media, Hyperreality, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels.

## Introduction: Critical Theory and the System of Language

Critical Theory, from the Frankfurt School, argues that human knowledge is shaped by history and backgrounds, making neutral truth impossible. Later, structural criticism based on Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas viewed language as a pre-existing system of rules. Because we are born into this complete structure, what we say is a product of the system rather than a purely independent choice.

Roland Barthes used these ideas to move into post-structuralism. In his 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author," he argued that a writer does not control the final meaning of a text. To give power to the reader, the author must step aside. Today's internet culture of reusing and remixing content acts as a real-world version of Barthes's ideas, while also showing the clear limits of this freedom.

## Objectives and Research Methodology

This paper evaluates how critical theory is updated within modern digital spaces. It examines "The Death of the Author" through the lens of internet remix culture to see how digital platforms flatten traditional media hierarchies. The text is analyzed in relation to user interaction, corporate ownership, and algorithms. Ultimately, it investigates how digital content generation allows modern users to act as scriptors who build new cultural narratives.

The methodology used is qualitative and analytical. The primary source is Roland Barthes's essay, 'The Death of the Author.' Secondary sources include books, articles, and journals focusing on structuralism, post-structuralism, and digital media trends. The analysis relies on structural linguistic concepts and critical media studies methods. By comparing print-based arguments with social media features, this research links theoretical text production to modern digital content consumption.

## The Theoretical Shift: From Author to Scriptor

For a long time, traditional book critics were obsessed with a writer's life. They treated the author like a god who held the single, absolute truth to a story, believing you had to study their family background and psychology to truly get the book (Barry 116). Roland Barthes completely disagreed with this. He argued that when we focus too much on the writer, we end up ignoring the actual words on the page. Language is an objective system that exists long before we do, so we are just using rules that are already there (Barry 118). An author does not invent a brand new language; they just work within a system that is already set up. Post-structuralism takes away this idea of a single, correct meaning (Abrams and Harpham 344). Without a writer controlling the message, a text opens up to all kinds of interpretations. Barthes redefines the creator as a *scriptor*, which is basically a text arranger. A scriptor does not create entirely original thoughts out of nothing.

Instead, Barthes famously writes, "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture"(Barthes 4). their only real job is to take existing cultural codes, phrases, and ideas, and rearrange them into fresh patterns.

### Barthes in the Digital World

The internet and mobile tools have dissolved the traditional authority of the creator. Today, anyone with a smartphone can produce and publish media, bypassing traditional corporate controllers.

| Cultural Field | Old Author-Centred View                                              | Today's Barthesian Reality                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Music Industry | A composer creates a new melody from pure inner inspiration.         | <b>Sampling &amp; Remix Culture:</b> Artists borrow older clips, loop them, and layer them to make new tracks, acting directly as digital scriptors.               |
| Online Content | A writer publishes a static, completely unchangeable essay or story. | <b>Hypertext &amp; User Media:</b> On networks like YouTube and Instagram, users routinely take existing videos, add commentary, edit the audio, and reshare them. |

### The Idea of Hyperreality

To understand how online content is made today, we have to look at the theory of hyperreality. This idea explains how copies of reality end up replacing reality itself. On social media, a video or image often does not point back to any original creator; instead, copies just link to other copies in a never ending loop. Rethinking Barthes through this lens shows how the original truth gets completely lost in the crowd (Baudrillard 4).

Two main things happen because of this online setup:

1. **The copy takes over:** A remixed or copied video can easily get way more views and influence than the original post, making the original author's intent completely irrelevant.
2. **Losing the background:** When media is constantly cut, remixed, and shared without mentioning who made it or why, the text becomes unstable. The history of the message disappears just to serve whatever is viral right now.

### Real-World Example: Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts

We can see this post-structuralist remix culture clearly in the inner mechanics of Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of *langue* (the language system) is just like the hidden code and algorithms of these apps (Habib 631). Individual short clips represent *parole* (our choices within that system). The app sets the rules and video lengths, while users simply fill in the blank spaces with trending cultural pieces.

A great example is viral audio trends on Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts. When a user makes a short clip using a trending sound from an old movie or a celebrity interview, they are not creating a brand new concept. Rethinking Barthes's scriptor in this space shows how they are simply stitching an existing sound onto their own video. The final clip is a blend of app data and user participation.

During this loop, the original creator of the audio is completely forgotten. The audience does not care who originally spoke those words; they only care about how the current user remixes that sound for a new joke. Meaning comes entirely from how the audience receives it. The video succeeds because it is an open text that anyone can copy, change, and reshare down an endless chain. This is the ultimate example of reader reception the audience takes complete control of the meaning.

However, this creative freedom hides a heavy corporate reality. While users feel free to remix media, their clicks are actively tracked and sold to advertisers. Rethinking Barthes's philosophy here reminds us that the death of the author does not actually liberate the audience; instead, it just keeps users scrolling for digital capitalism. The reader gets the illusion of absolute freedom, but that freedom is carefully boxed inside an app designed to make a profit.

### The Growth of Digital Meme Culture

Beyond short videos, internet meme culture shows exactly how Barthes's scriptor works in daily life. A meme usually starts as a screenshot from a movie, a stock photo, or a candid picture of a celebrity. The person who originally took the photo or directed the scene is instantly forgotten. Once the image is uploaded online, it becomes public property for anyone to change.

In this space, users download the image and add their own text, turning a simple picture into a tool for social commentary or personal jokes. The meaning of the meme does not depend on the image itself, but on how readers choose to rewrite it. An image meant to show sadness can easily be changed to express sarcasm or joy. This continuous shift proves that a text is fluid rather than fixed. Rethinking the author's role reveals that the original intent of the photographer is completely replaced by the shared interpretation of the internet public.

This collaborative process matches Barthes's argument that a text's true value lies in its destination (the reader) rather than its origin (the author). On social media, the reader acts as a writer, editor, and distributor all at once. By changing captions and sharing memes, the audience keeps the text alive through constant transformation. The text survives precisely because the author is removed, letting the community bring new life to old symbols.

### Findings and Discussion

The analysis shows that rethinking Barthes in today's digital world reveals how contemporary spaces use the "death of the author" as both a tool for creative freedom and a way to make money. While removing the creator

challenges old rules about who owns content, it also leaves online text completely open to big companies. Without a clear creator attached to it, media loses its original history. This makes it easy for platform algorithms to copy, change, and sell individual creative work without giving proper credit. This lack of protection puts original creators in danger. This study proves that modern apps turn user interactions into endless language games where the original meaning is quickly lost. By putting the viewer's choices ahead of the creator's intent, social media executes post-structuralist ideas perfectly. However, this process strips the message of its real world context. Freedom of interpretation, when separated from reality, becomes just another tool to keep users scrolling. People believe they are using a free public space, but they are actually operating within a highly managed commercial structure that profits by erasing original artistic identity.

### Conclusion

Rethinking Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" in contemporary media remains an important tool for understanding how texts change in modern digital spaces. Looking at Barthes through today's media platform proves that the erasure of the author is fully active in our daily culture of video Reels, Shorts, and internet memes. The traditional power that once belonged to a single writer has now shifted completely to the active, scrolling audience. However, modern apps show that removing the creator leaves an empty space that algorithms can easily control. Ultimately, changing and resharing media is never completely neutral; it is a constant struggle over who owns the message. To consume online content responsibly today, we must balance the creative freedom of the audience with a clear awareness of the platform algorithms that shape our screens. True digital literacy means realizing that while the human author may be gone, the corporate platform has stepped into their place to guide how we read, think, and create.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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