

Commodification and Subjectivization

Toward a Critique of the Authorship Discourse

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ABSTRACT What does it mean that the author increasingly turns into a commodity? The article contains a discussion of some academic responses – taken from celebrity studies and autofiction studies – to this tendency. The texts discussed share an effort to rethink authorship, but nonetheless the implicit result is a reinforcement of a traditional, romantic notion of the author. Above all there is a lack of reflection on subjectivity in the authorship discourse, where concepts like “author”, “subject”, “self” often are treated as synonymous. In that sense the academic responses are part of the commodification they ought to be studying. On another level this commodification could be understood as an expression of a more general crisis of subjectivity: there is a need of stories about autonomous subjects just because of a more extensive desubjectivation. Finally the article turns to Theodor W. Adorno and Jacques Rancière in order to find a more dynamic and apt understanding of subjectivity.

KEYWORDS Author, subjectivity, commodification, autofiction, celebrity studies, desubjectivization, genius, Adorno, Rancière

1. Introduction: The Author Commodified?

We have gone from a time when *literature*, normally in the form of the book, was the commodity of literary circulation, to an age where the *author* is the primary commodity, the item that the audience craves and the merchandise that publishing firms and mass media provide. As Andrew Bennett, author of the book *The Author*, remarks, “[c]ontemporary culture seems to have an endless appetite for literary biographies, [...] for newspaper and TV interviews with famous writers”.¹ Authors used to be the creators of books; today they are the products. A Swedish editor expressed this poignantly when he turned down a manuscript of a friend of mine, saying, “We’re not really interested in books; we’re interested in authorships”.

The aim of this article is to reach a critical understanding of this development, this commodification of authorship. What are the causes behind it? What are the consequences? These questions are, of course, too broad to be answered comprehensively; instead, the article is confined to the realm of subjectivity. The idea behind this focus is that today’s obsession with the author figure – the epitome of the self-constituting subject – is a symptom of a historical crisis of subjectivity. A more precise purpose of this article could thus be formulated as an attempt to discern and theo-

size the form of subjectivity that is intrinsic, or perhaps absent, in the commodification of authorship. If “all commodification is a forgetting”, as Theodor W. Adorno remarked, what, in the case of the commodified author, is being forgotten?²

The article’s primary object of investigation is neither the literary institution nor the current literary trends; instead, the analysis focuses on the critical, academic responses to these trends. I want to draw attention to a recurring aspect in a number of critical attempts – taken from the field of celebrity studies and the discourse on autofiction – to reconsider the author figure. I argue that there is a general tendency in the contemporary author discourse to reinstate or presuppose a Romantic notion of the author. More specifically, the attempts to reconsider the role of the author tend to re-establish the autonomous author subject as a given, something that exists prior to the literary institution.³ Since it is the general tendency I want to capture, it should be clear from the beginning that I don’t pretend to do full justice to the texts discussed.

If the tone of the first half of the article – sections two through four – is critical, the second half – sections five and six – is an attempt to articulate an alternative conceptual framework, in order to step away from the Romanticism implicated in the first half. Instead, the question of subjectivity will be examined, in a discussion starting in Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of the notion of subjectivity. To open up for another perspective on creativity, the article finally turns to Adorno’s critical discussion of “genius” and Jacques Rancière’s concept of “subjectivization”.

What I’ll attempt to demonstrate is that literary scholarship is not unaffected by the commodification of authorship; on the contrary, it is something we contribute to.

2. Example One: Celebrity Studies

It is tempting to object to the depiction above, arguing that the commodification of authorship is not a new trend. Didn’t the author-subject receive a market value already in the nineteenth century?⁴ Since the beginning of the twentieth century if not longer, Timothy W. Galow argues in *Writing Celebrity*, celebrity culture “helped transform all aspects of the literary field, from the production and marketing of a book to the way in which it was received by consumers and professional critics. It also changed how authors presented themselves to the reading public.”⁵ However, the validity of his comment doesn’t mean that the phenomenon hasn’t become more acute lately. The growing field of celebrity studies also points to a historical change in this respect.

In any case, a consequence of the transformation Galow discusses is that “celebrity” must be seen as a crucial “interpretive paradigm in modernist studies”. According to his understanding, there is no conflict between the celebrity function and the authorial intention. Regarding Gertrude Stein, one of his examples, he states that her “authorial identity, which, she claims, exists only in the act of creation, lets her downplay overt signs of difference – including femininity, lesbianism, and Jewishness – in her textual persona without altogether rejecting them as constitutive elements of her consciousness.”⁶ So, in short, Stein consciously makes use of her own celebrity function in her writing. This means that we can neither isolate the textual artefact from the authorial instance, nor can we find the explanation of the artefact in the biography of its writer. The relationship must be understood in a more dialectical manner.

The English scholar Loren Glass makes a similar point in his book on literary celebrities: “The individual authorial consciousness as elaborated by the practice of modernist authorship stubbornly persists as something more than an empty structure, complicating the easy dismissal of the celebrity’s subjectivity in so much recent celebrity theory.”⁷ In other words, the creativity of the author cannot be dismissed as something illusory. A bit surprisingly Glass turns to Foucault and Barthes in order to strengthen his argument. In short, he contends that the cult around Foucault himself disproves his idea of the author function: Foucault and Barthes “have become famous authors precisely by announcing the death of the author.”⁸ Reality disproves theory. But isn’t it just as possible to argue the opposite? The fact that even Foucault has become a celebrity illustrates exactly his point: the acclaimed author – or in Foucault’s words, the author function – including “Foucault”, “Barthes” and “Derrida”, is always a product of structures that the empirical person who has written the text doesn’t control. The potential substance of the ideas in their texts doesn’t make their author names immune to commodification.

There is no need to enter more deeply into Glass’s and Galow’s works here since the point is sufficiently clear: while both scholars show how celebrity culture transformed the literary field, there is one aspect that isn’t transformed after all, namely the authority of the author. Quite the contrary, the revelation of the play with persona and celebrity status brings us back to the consciousness belonging to the person behind the stage, so to speak. From that perspective, all other forces, agencies or interests inherent to the celebrity logic become secondary.

It would be unfair to deny the awareness of such forces in the field of celebrity studies. When Eric Eisner, in another example, writes that “[t]he

concept of celebrity connects the social and experiential terrain on which individual writers and readers encounter one another with the abstract, institutional structures informing writer-reader transactions”, there is clearly an awareness that the formation of literature goes beyond the consciousness of the single author. There is always a transaction taking place; “celebrity” is not just a “possible version of authorship but rather [...] a historically determinate form of the relationship between readers and writers”.⁹ And yet, as a matter of course, Eisner throughout his work treats the literary expressions, the poems, as results of decisions made by the poets (i.e. the empirical subjects behind the literary works) in question. Examples of this model of thought can be found on virtually every page of his book: “Byron in *Don Juan* looks back on his fame as something already past”; Keats, Shelley and Landon “all must deal with the example of Byron as they negotiate the relationship between poetic identity and celebrity”; “these poets also work out their own models of celebrity in a literary culture where the phenomenon of Byron has had a signal impact”.¹⁰ The grammatical subjects are always the poets. This observation may appear mundane, but, especially in a context of celebrity culture, there are certainly reasons to turn this causality around: isn’t it Byron, not *Don Juan*, that is looked back upon? Aren’t Keats, Shelley and Landon the objects of the negotiation? Aren’t the “models” mentioned by Eisner worked out in the transactions between editors and authors, customers and salesmen, publishing houses and people in need of money? In other words, isn’t the subject behind the predicates more difficult to locate than the quotes indicate?

3. Example Two: Autofiction Studies

Another area to consider when discussing the return of the author and the commodification of authorship is the current trend of autofictive writing, i.e. a form of writing that deliberately makes use of the indefinite relation between fiction and facts, between the novel and the autobiography. As Manuel Alberca remarks in his book on autobiographic fiction, *El pacto ambiguo*, it is not difficult to find examples of autofiction *avant la lettre*, before Serge Doubrovsky invented the term in 1977.¹¹ And yet it is clear that this is a trend that has gained momentum during the last few decades and characterises a large part of the prose written in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Autofiction is suddenly everywhere, often in the shape of very thick books, often by male writers, often dealing in a Proustian manner with their own stories of becoming authors, often highly praised by the critics.

The academic discussion of the autofiction phenomenon is to a large

degree aimed at reaching clarity – clear distinctions and tenable definitions that help answer questions like these: How are we to distinguish between an autobiography and a novel? Which is a subcategory of the other, and vice versa?¹² (Most of the attempts are variants of Philippe Lejeune’s efforts in the seventies.) Alberca’s position is typical in that respect: In light of the elusiveness of this literary phenomenon he argues for a rather narrow, technical definition of the concept: autofiction consists of stories that present themselves as fiction but where the narrator and the protagonist nevertheless have the same name as the author.¹³ In that sense autofiction may be understood as a new genre, a hybrid form evolving in the areas between the boundaries of the novel and the autobiography but belonging to neither category.

At the same time, Alberca argues for a wider perspective, relating the genre to contemporary capitalism, economic factors, individualism, and other broader socio-political ideas: “The incessant construction and reconstruction of the I, fundamentally identified with the body, has turned into the main imperative of the capitalism of fiction. In a hyperindividualized society, the I knows neither limits nor barriers.”¹⁴ From that perspective the autofictive trend is an expression of the victory of individualism over the collective and of a new configuration of subjectivity: “All this configures a narcissist – or rather neonarcissist – society and subject: that is, a detached, godless, distanced narcissus; a subject in crisis, split, doubtful, without force.”¹⁵ It’s not difficult to agree with this interpretation of the historical situation. However, Alberca’s reasoning is problematic in that, despite the awareness of the structural changes in both society and subjectivity, in the end everything tends to be derived from the agency of the author in a traditional sense. No matter how fragmentary and vague the concept of the individual has become, “we all identify a human being in the author” and we understand this relationship as natural, if only to avoid becoming insane, according to Alberca.¹⁶ In other words, individualism is not only understood as a cause of autofiction; it is also reinforced in Alberca’s own theorizing. The author, the *I*, the subject, the human being – they all appear as synonymous in Alberca’s writing – is still presupposed as the outset of writing (as when it is said, about a novel by Antonio Muñoz Molina, that he “took the family history as a novelistic reference”, or in the more general comment about a “Spanish novelist who has had the guts to display his disgraces”¹⁷). All in all, the author is still the guarantor for the new genre that has been let loose. In the end it is as if all the distinctions were made just to maintain the authority of the Romantic author.

The concept of “performative biographism”, introduced by the Danish

scholar Jon Helt Haarder some four years ago, is interesting from that perspective. His argument draws on Lejeune's theory of autofiction, Hal Foster's idea of the return of the real and Seán Burke's critique of the post-structural discourse of the author; the literary examples include a number of contemporary Scandinavian novels (by writers such as Claus Beck Nielsen and Carina Rydberg), where the protagonist and narrator bear the same name as the authors. What characterises these literary examples, according to Helt Haarder, is "that the biographical reference, on the one hand, functions as the return of the real in the form of credible holes through every representation, just as undeniably real as the bloody wounds the disciple Thomas stuck his fingers through. On the other hand, the biographical reference appears as a mouldable material."¹⁸ In short, Helt Haarder's point is that the wide trend of autofictive writing should be understood not in terms of authenticity but, rather, as a conscious play with both reality and the medium – a performative biographism. The strength of his argument is that it reveals the dialectic between matter and mediation, reality and fiction; the problem is that Haarder himself betrays this dialectic: at the same time as the author is said to be performed in the work, he or she is also presupposed as something standing outside of the dialectic, controlling the game this author is said to be a part of.

This is a tendency that unites all the examples – both from celebrity studies and from the autofiction discourse – discussed so far: they all relate to the author as an entity which, in the end, is a given, someone whose autonomy is presupposed from the outset.

4. The Author Restored

Let's return for a moment to the remark by the editor who turned down the manuscript: "We're not really interested in books, we're interested in authorships." What did he really mean? If the remark sounds cynical when cited out of context, that was, of course, not his intention. On the contrary, he probably wanted to express the responsible attitude of the editorial house: they really *take care* of their authors, right from the beginning. If the debut turns out to be a failure, it's not a disaster, since their sights are set farther; they are cultivating a whole authorship. They don't abandon a writer after just one book. The irony of this responsible publishing politics is that, as described initially and notwithstanding the caring attitude, it is part of a more wide-ranging commodification of the author figure. The literary quality becomes an attribute of the name on the cover, not the other way around. In other words, the "bad" consequence is a result of the best intentions.

A similar logic can be detected in the authorship discourse. As historical phenomena, as forms of writing, and as products for a market, both the cult of celebrities and the trend of autofictive writing imply, in two different ways, a *destabilizing* of the instance – and hence authority – of the author, in the case of autofiction by disclosing the fictive character of the author, in the case of celebrity cult through the capitalist logic that produces the authors. Ironically, however, the effect, at least on the surface, is the reverse: the traditional notion of the author has been strengthened. And what’s worse is that academic research to a large extent is playing along in this reversal of logic.¹⁹

This is arguably true for all the academics cited so far; for Galow, Glass and Eisner, as well as for Helt Haarder and Alberca: their attempts to complicate, deepen or reconfigure the question of authorship don’t really abandon the Romantic idea of authorship that was the outset; quite on the contrary, this idea seems to be strengthened through their discussions. In the end we’re facing another version of the traditional authorial intention that somehow is understood to control the game it is a product of.

There is a point in relating these observations to the well-known narrative of the death and return of the author.²⁰ If the author was obliterated in the 1960s, as the story goes, he or she now reappears, not only in the form of biographies and autofiction but as an essential aspect of hermeneutical reading: “Out of the ashes of that ‘death’ and in spite of the desire of the critics to see the subject disappear, the author is reborn, not without contradictions, as an autobiographical subject and the new wave of biographism testifies to this.”²¹ Alberca’s description reads like a summary of Seán Burke’s influential narrative of the death and return of the author: after having been repressed in the sixties and seventies, the author subject has returned. Several aspects of this narrative can be questioned (I’ll return to the issue later), but as an account of a general shift in interests, it is hard to object against the author’s return. However, one detail deserves further scrutiny: As indicated above, Alberca argues as if “subject” and “author” were the same thing; at the very least, he isn’t interested in distinguishing between them.

He is not alone in making that identification. For example, in his book *The Author*, Andrew Bennett describes in passing, “the ‘modern’ sense of the author as a personalized individual expressing intentions and a particular subjectivity”.²² This is arguably a concise description of how the author typically is understood today: the individuality of the author is presumed as a given, an essence or feature that has the capacity to express itself and intend something, which is then understood as “sub-

jective". The author is, in short, understood as the source of subjectivity. Along the same lines, while discussing Chaucer and the rise of authorial consciousness, Bennett writes that "Chaucer clearly expresses an emergent authorial self".²³

One could argue that the truth is the opposite: "Chaucer" is the expression of the authorial instance. However, the point is that in either case – i.e. if you tend toward Philippe Lejeune or Paul de Man (is it the psychological person who expresses himself by making use of the grammatical person, or is the "psychological person" merely an *effect* of the expression as such?²⁴) – the focus stays the same. The discussion typically follows along two lines of questioning: that of the relationship between *fiction* and *reality* and that of the relationship between *reader* and *writer*.²⁵ The outcome may very well be an increased understanding of the dialectic between one and the other (i.e. there is no fiction without reality and vice versa), but at the same time the very discussion tends to give the categories a natural character and reinforce an assumption that these are the only dimensions that exist. When the editors of the German anthology *Rückkehr des Autors* declare, at the end of their long introduction, that the aim is to reach a synthesis between an author-oriented praxis and an author-critical theory, the primary outcome is clear: the importance of the author is strengthened, not so much through the argument as through the categories and concepts in which the whole discussion is framed.²⁶ The author is reified, not only by the market logic but also by the academic circulation of concepts.

Adorno's remark that "all commodification is a forgetting" is not an assertion that the commodification should be overcome through recollection. The forgetting is objective; that which is forgotten is concealed in the objects that can no longer express their hidden content.²⁷ What, in that case, is hidden or forgotten in the commodity of the author? Perhaps the fact that the word "author", as Thomas Götselius demonstrates in a study of writing and subjectivity in sixteenth-century Europe, can be derived from the word "authority" or *auctoritas*. Götselius quotes Thomas M. Greene, who remarks that "[t]he author (*auctor*, *actor*, *autor*) at a medieval university was a writer whose work had commanded respect for so many centuries as to have become an authority (*autorità*), to be read as an *authentic* source of knowledge."²⁸ In other words, authority was something a reader could experience via authors and reproduce as a commentator, but for a person to claim to be an author himself was out of the question. The authority was always already established, ages ago, irrespective of the field of knowledge, Götselius states: "As a consequence

of this there are no contemporary ‘authors’ in the medieval discursive system. The author is always an other, belonging to history.”²⁹ With the advent of book printing, all this changes, as Götselius scrupulously demonstrates. Around 1500 C.E. the well-known metaphor of the author as a creator started to spread. Today the notion is so well-accepted that it is no longer a metaphor at all. This is what has been forgotten.

5. The Subject Dissolved

When there is talk of the *subject* in the authorship discourse, the concept is often used rather unreflectively, almost as a synonym to identity, the self, the author, the person, the individual, the ego. While there is a high degree of technical awareness of the nuances of the institution of the author (concepts like “author function”, “implied author”, “model author”, “abstract author” and “narrator” are indications of that, for example³⁰), *subjectivity* is normally used in a less reflective way.

To return to Bennett’s example, when he writes that “Chaucer clearly expresses an emergent authorial self”, the model of subjectivity that is implied in his argument belongs to what Stefan Jonsson, in his *Subject without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity*, describes as the “expressivist paradigm”. In this paradigm the subject is assumed to consist of an *inner* true self, corresponding to an *external* bourgeois identity. According to Jonsson this split subject may be traced back to the antinomies of the Kantian transcendental subject. However, the problem with the Kantian model of subjectivity (and here Jonsson relies on Georg Lukács) is that reason may only perceive that in reality which it itself projects on it – everything that doesn’t correspond to reason’s principles is theoretically unknowable. It is exactly these neglected aspects (the particular, individual, moral, intuitive, sensible) that later on are raised and affirmed in the expressivist paradigm, where they are assigned to the interiority of the subject. In this way, Jonsson concludes, the modern individual is constituted by means of the division of the subject. Or, from another angle, the centred subject, preserving an inner true self, is an ideological construction whose purpose is to conceal the division.³¹

According to Jonsson, this paradigm undergoes a crisis in the beginning of the twentieth century, and the model of subjectivity breaks down. To a certain extent that is probably true – Musil, Kafka, Woolf and other writers of the time anticipate a critique of the subject that is to be formulated philosophically half a century later. But on the other hand it is clear that the “expressivist paradigm” has all but dissolved – the author discourse is still one of the places where it is most visible.

It would be unfair to say that there is no awareness of this discussion in the authorship discourse. For example, Lejeune remarks on one occasion that we're all familiar with the indeterminacy that we try to neutralize with the help of the proper name, the name of the author. This calls, he adds, for an analysis "of the discourse of subjectivity and individuality as *the myth* of our civilization".³² (Italics added.) To some extent his comment is as an echo of a passage in *The Genealogy of Morality*, where Friedrich Nietzsche talks about a "changeling" (Wechselbalg) that is smuggled into thinking by way of language: the notion of the subject.³³ The problem with the modern notion of the subject, according to Nietzsche, is that it facilitates a self-delusion: "The reason the subject (or, as we more colloquially say, *the soul*) has been, until now, the best doctrine on earth, is perhaps because it facilitated that sublime self-deception whereby the majority of the dying, the weak and the oppressed of every kind could construe weakness itself as freedom, and their particular mode of existence as an *accomplishment*."³⁴ What we regard as a free action, "an accomplishment" of the subject, is always a secondary reaction – the subject is actually subject *to* forces that are not his or hers.

Nietzsche makes this remark in 1887, at a time when the notion of the freely acting subject – that is, the modern subject – had just begun to reach a broader audience.³⁵ Still, Nietzsche anticipates the postmodern critique of the subject that was to follow eighty years later. An important aspect of the argument is the inevitability of the illusion: even though the subject is merely "a seduction of language", we can't get rid of it.³⁶ In a way Jacques Derrida stressed this same point in the discussion following his famous lecture in Baltimore in 1966: "The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it. That is to say, I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions."³⁷ It is necessary to emphasise this distinction because there is a widespread misunderstanding on this point: the so-called postmodern theorists did not "do away with", "kill" or "destroy" the subject (How on earth could they have done that?); they just saw the need to rethink the premises, logic and genealogy of the predominant conceptions of subjectivity. If there was something they wanted to do away with, it was the existing, widespread assumption about the givenness of the liberal idea of the autonomous subject, as well as the routine-like identification of *subject* and *individual*.

It is tempting to transfer Nietzsche's critical point to the authorship discourse: isn't there a similar self-delusion, a belief in the accomplish-

ments of the subject, still involved in the current critical engagement with the author? My hypothesis is that the strong interest in – what could even be called an obsession with – the author today is a reaction not so much to postmodern theorizing as to a historical crisis of the subject. In short, there is a desire to confirm the autonomy and power of the self today precisely because it is dissolving. We crave authors because they are the epitome of the active, self-constituting subject, and we crave this today because of the increasing powerlessness of the individual. This is a problem above all for a liberalist world view, founded on the belief in the free will of the individual. Accordingly there is a strong and ongoing need to convince us all of the unbroken vigour and autonomy of the self-constitutive subject. And that's where literature is useful: literature can very effectively provide not only authors to be admired but also images of subjects constituting their own circumstances. P. David Marshall's description of the celebrity holds true for the author as well: "The celebrity is the independent individual par excellence; he or she represents the meaning of freedom and accessibility in a culture. [...] As a system, celebrities provide a spectacle of individuality in which will itself can produce change and transformation. The spectacular quality of the code of individuality that is enacted by public personalities works ideologically to maintain the idea of continuity and the disenfranchised rest of society."³⁸

In the context of these ideas, what does it mean to say that we are witnessing a historical crisis of the subject? The modern subject may very well have become something belonging to the past. What distinguishes this modern subject from a pre-modern subject is, in broad terms, the claim to be what the term "subjectum" denoted in pre-modern times: something fundamental, substantial, and self-constituting. "The subject is someone who attributes his conduct to himself", as Christoph Menke puts it.³⁹ That which used to be a subaltern in God's creation is now transformed into an active, thinking, autonomous, creative *I*, establishing himself with his own will. The modern subject is in control, so to speak, at least until Freud enters the scene.

The exact moment of this change may of course be discussed – while Menke places the shift around 1700 and Heidegger highlights Descartes, Stephen Greenblatt finds the origin in the Renaissance. Naturally, every commentator focuses on different aspects of this new subject, depending on his or her interests.⁴⁰ In any case, the crucial point is that the subject is not a given but a historical product, the sedimented result of processes and structures that existed prior to the subject. So if the subject arose in history, we must also take its possible end into consideration.

But on the other hand, as Derrida points out, it is hard to imagine the subject being obliterated – it would be like obliterating “left” in favour of “right”. There are two aspects of subjectivity at stake here. On the one hand, the subject is a grammatical and logical category, the antithesis of the object, the agent of the predicate. It wouldn’t really make sense to say that *this* subject is in crisis. On the other hand, the subject is a historical and social entity, something that comes close to the figure of the modern man, the individual, the bourgeois citizen inhabiting the secularized modern world. And as many commentators have suggested, this figure may very well be in crisis.⁴¹

This distinction suggests that we should be careful not to confuse these two concepts of subjectivity; we must keep separate the subjectivity of an a-historic grammatical phenomenon and the subjectivity as a historic entity and experience. However, as Nietzsche points out this clear distinction may very well be illusory. Language and reality cannot be separated that easily; how we talk about things, the grammar and concepts we use, inevitably affects how we think about them and, thus, what they become.

There is always subjectivity, in the sense that there will always be agency – the question is how we conceptualize it. Agency doesn’t necessarily belong to an autonomous individual; there may be subjectivity without the modern, self-constituting individual.

6. Subjectivization – Desubjectivization

In the chapter on “Subject–Object” in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno reflects on the notion of genius. Not surprisingly, he is critical of the concept, and yet he admits that there is some truth in it: “If anything is to be salvaged of this concept it must be stripped away from its crude equation with the creative subject, who through vain exuberance bewitches the artwork into a document of its maker and thus diminishes it. The objectivity of artworks – a thorn in the side of the inhabitants of a society based on barter because they mistakenly expect that art will mollify the alienation – is translated back into the person who stands behind the work, even though he is usually only the character mask of those who want to promote the work as an article of consumption.”⁴² This rich passage sums up the most important points of this article: our society has a commercial need for the author-figure; the problem is that this figure obliterates the objective qualities of the work (with Adorno: the “truth content”), and reduces it to a document about the person behind it.

This doesn’t mean that the author is redundant from Adorno’s per-

spective. Subjectivity is a necessary condition for the artwork, he writes, but the creativity or spontaneity of the author is merely the medium of an objectivation that is produced by society. However, our interest in the author-genius diverts our attention from that production. Adorno goes as far as stating that the artwork is not creation and the human being, not a creator. If there *is* indeed genius, it is rather a *moment* or *place* where the work happens, so to speak. “To be genial means to hit upon a constellation, subjectively to achieve the objective”.⁴³

Already this brief account of Adorno’s aesthetic theory makes one thing clear: it relies heavily on the categories *subject* and *object*. To Adorno the subject is clearly a historical entity – over and over again he returns to the observation that the subject is in crisis, in decay, or dissolution.⁴⁴ At the same time the subject is maintained – almost postulated – as a necessary condition for critical theory *per se*. In that sense there is an undeniable conservative side to his argument, if not to his whole theory: What is this subject, if not the bourgeois individual made transcendent?

But this is why his critical account of genius is so interesting: here it becomes clear that “subjectivity” may be understood as something more open. Ironically, Adorno actually tries to salvage the notion of genius by liberating it from individualism. Genius doesn’t belong to the empirical subject, the individual or the author; rather, it points to something in the aesthetic object that is alien to the consciousness of the author. And yet this objectivity wouldn’t be there without the subjective moment.

In his essay “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” Jacques Rancière discusses Hannah Arendt’s and Giorgio Agamben’s analyses of human rights, and, more precisely, the paradox inherent in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man from 1789. The paradox, as pointed out by Arendt, is that those most in *need* of human rights are those who are deprived of them. Rancière reflects on the same paradox, but he doesn’t quite understand it in the same way as Arendt. He is critical of his predecessor’s rigid distinction between politics and the apolitical life of the individual. This distinction, he argues, leads both Arendt and Agamben into an “ontological trap” where the concrete problems – the situation of the refugees, concentration camps, etc. – are reduced to an ethical conflict between Good and Evil, and every possibility that political change could hold is ruled out from the outset.

It could be argued that Rancière doesn’t really do justice to Arendt’s analysis and that the difference between them isn’t as significant as he contends.⁴⁵ Nevertheless I believe that Rancière accomplishes a small but significant shift in the way he conceptualizes the holder of the rights. At

the centre of Arendt's attention is the rightless *human being*, Agamben's more bio-politically influenced reasoning focuses on the *bare life* produced by the concentration camps, but in Rancière's discussion there is nothing but the *subject* of rights.⁴⁶ In this conceptual move he abandons the idea of a lowest common denominator (a human essence, a bare life), for an open subject position. Or not even that: "The subject of rights is the subject, or more accurately the process of subjectivization, that bridges the interval between two forms of the existence of those rights."⁴⁷ The focus is shifted from one of two subject positions (human or citizen) to the *subjectivization* that he discerns in between these two forms.

This process of subjectivization, Rancière states in another essay, is a "formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other".⁴⁸ In other words, the process of subjectivization opens a difference *within* the subject that appeared to be self-identical; a non-identity appears in my own subjectivity. In yet another text he remarks that the Cartesian "*ego sum, ego existo*" still is the prototype for the existing Western forms of subjectivity.⁴⁹ However, following Rancière's logic through, these Cartesian forms – the human being, the autonomous individual, the creative genius, the outstanding celebrity, the modern author – conceal processes and multiplicities that can't be identified within the current order. When we limit agency to figures like these, we implicitly reproduce a Cartesian subjectivity, and hence the very processes, openings and interspaces that constitute our subjectivity are concealed. Rancière's ideas about subjectivization can be seen as an attempt to open an uncertainty in the autonomous subject, whereupon both modern humanism at large and the liberal ideology are founded, to facilitate an uncovering of the percepts and affects preceding the conscious self.

Questioning the autonomous subject has direct implications for our conception of authorship. When we mechanically identify subjectivity and authorship – or even treat subjectivity as a product of the author's creativity – we're concealing the subjectivization involved in writing and reading, what Adorno calls the genius in the artwork. The identification of subjectivity and authorship also leads to a simplified notion of the emergence of literature: the history of literature appears to be a result of the intended achievements of certain author subjects, rather than as a sequence of forms of subjectivization produced by factors outside of the writing person.

If we focus on the logic of celebrity culture or the trend of autofictive writing, it is thus necessary to distinguish two movements: first, the authorial performance of individual freedom, which, according to Adorno, actually reveals an objective lack of freedom; and, second, the revelation

of new forms of subjectivization, which to some extent makes Adorno's theory obsolete. From this perspective, the crucial question when looking at a piece of literature is not "Which author wrote this?" but, rather, "What form of subjectivity is crystallized here? How does it differ from the familiar identities at hand?"

All this points toward the necessity to move attention away from the creative individual called "author". Instead, if we want to understand the creative forces behind literary works, we should focus on the conventions, relations and material premises that both make creation possible and limit it as well as on the micrological events that take place in the act of reading, transgressing our own subjectivity. Subjectivity in its fixed, crystallized forms always conceals something more dynamic and undefined. It ought to be the task of criticism to uncover this dynamic, not to cover it up.

Notes

1. Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 108.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, letter to Walter Benjamin, 29 February 1940, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 321.
3. To a certain extent my argument is similar to Michel Foucault's discussion in "What is an Author?" However, the point I'll try to reach is a slightly different one. If Foucault inverted the causality between author and discourse, it is not the discursive logic that is in focus here, but the form of subjectivity that tends to be presupposed in the authorship discussion. Cf. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?", *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
4. See Manuel Alberca, *El pacto ambiguo: De la novela autobiográfica a la autoficción* (Madrid: Biblioteca nueva, 2007), 23.
5. Timothy W. Galow, *Writing Celebrity: Stein, Fitzgerald, and the Modern(ist) Art of Self-Fashioning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xii.
6. Galow, xiii.
7. Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2004), 4.
8. Glass, 5.
9. Eric Eisner, *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Literary Celebrity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.
10. Eisner, 47.

11. Alberca, 141–43.

12. See, for example, Eva Ahlstedt, "Den franska autofiktionsdebatten: En pågående debatt om en mångtydig term" [The French Debate on Autofiction: An ongoing Debate on an ambiguous Term], in *Den tvetydiga pakten: Skönlitterära texter i gränslandet mellan självbiografi och fiktion*, eds. Eva Ahlstedt and Britt-Marie Karlsson (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2011).

13. Alberca, 158.

14. Alberca, 41. (My translation. This is the case for every translation where no other translator is named.)

15. Alberca, 42.

16. Alberca, 63.

17. Alberca, 107, 103.

18. Jon Helt Haarder, "Ingen fiktion. Bara reduktion: Performativ biografism som konstnärlig strömning kring millenieskiftet" [No Fiction. Only Reduction: Performative Biographism as an Artistic Trend around the new Millennium], trans. Björn Andersson et al, *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, 4 (2007), 83–84.

19. A trivial explanation of this is that most of the works in the fields mentioned, articles as well as books, are oriented – for practical or conventional reasons – toward one or a small number of well-known author names: Stein, Shelley, Joyce, Fitzgerald... This means that the traditional form of categorizing literature is maintained already in the disposition of writing; the regime of the author genius is preserved by the existing academic publishing forms.

20. See Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992). Burke's influential critique of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida is substantial, especially regarding the reception of these theorists ("Indeed, were we in search of the most flagrant abuses of critical *auterism* in recent times then we need look no further than the secondary literature on Barthes, Foucault and Derrida"), but it also has big problems. Burke credits the three authors with a project (of obliterating the subject) that he distils by removing everything that points in another direction." The death of the author 'proves' the death of the author: subjectivity is set to the side, therefore subjectivity does not exist." Burke, 158, 160.

21. Alberca, 27.

22. Bennett, 40.

23. Bennett, 41.

24. See Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 69; Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact", in *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 20–21.

25. For examples of this, see *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines um-*

strittenen Begriffs, eds. Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, Matias Martinez and Simone Winko (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999); *Selvskreven*, ed. Henrik Skov Nielsen, Stefan Kjerkegaard and Kristin Ørjesæter (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2006); or the Swedish anthology referred to above, *Den tveydiga pakt*, eds. Ahlstedt and Karlsson.

26. Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, Matias Martinez, Simone Winko, “Rede über den Autor an die Gebildeten unter seinen Verächtern. Historische Modelle und systematische Perspektiven”, in *Rückkehr des Autors*.

27. Adorno, letter to Walter Benjamin.

28. Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 12.

29. Thomas Götselius, *Själens medium: Skrift och subjekt i Nordeuropa omkring 1500* [The Medium of the Soul: Writing and Subjectivity in Northern Europe around 1500] (Gothenburg: Glänta Produktion, 2010), 222.

30. See Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept And Controversy*, trans. Alastair Matthews (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

31. Stefan Jonsson, *Subject Without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 32.

32. Lejeune, 20.

33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 26; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral. Eine Streitschrift* (Leipzig: Verlag von C. G. Neumann, 1887), § I.13, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>.

34. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 27.

35. See Christoph Menke, “Subjektivität”, in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, vol. 5, eds. Karlheinz Barck et al (Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2003), 734.

36. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 26.

37. Jacques Derrida, “Discussion”, in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 271.

38. P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 246.

39. Menke, 735. A slightly different version is provided by Martin Heidegger, who makes a distinction between *subjecticity* and *subjectivity*. While we’re familiar with the second concept, the first term denotes the quality of being a *subiectum*, that which lies before, that which is acted upon. In this perspective, Alain de Libera writes quoting Heidegger, the “subject ‘had first [...] no special relationship to man and none at all to the I’. [...] Stones, plants and animals are subjects – something lying-before of itself – no less than man is.” But since Descartes

“man ‘comes to play the role of the one and only subject proper.’” Man becomes the subiectum par excellence. Alain de Libera, “Subject: (Re-/decentred)”, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 167 (2011), 19. See also Sven-Olov Wallenstein, “Heidegger’s Turns”, in *Essays, Lectures* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2007), 79–80.

40. See Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 3, 19–21; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1–2.

41. To give evidence of this is beyond the scope of this article, but one example to look into is the European crisis, where traditional parliamentary government was suddenly suspended (in Greece and Italy), and elected leaders were replaced by representatives from the financial world. What’s symptomatic in this situation is that it is getting harder and harder to discern a subject behind the actions – the politicians seem just as powerless as the voters; agency is apparently not to be found on the level of individual citizens or even traditional party politics, but in the logic of the globalized currency and stock markets, etc. Another example is Facebook, where a large chunk of the Western world is busy constructing their own pages with the tools provided by the Facebook corporation. What’s significant here is how the users are being subjected to a medium exactly when they are acting as free, creative subjects.

42. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 2002), 170.

43. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 171.

44. The most concise account of this argument is perhaps the preface to *Minima Moralia*. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 15–18.

45. Above all it is doubtful whether Arendt understands the bare, apolitical life of the human being as something to affirm, and not as a danger. Rancière’s critique seems to imply that Arendt adheres to a natural law, while in fact she is arguably critical to this tradition. A more thorough development of this argument can be found in a Swedish journal. See Maria Johansen, “De mänskliga rättigheternas paradox” [The Paradox of Human Rights], *Glänta* 1 (2007).

46. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Ruskin House, 1958), 294–99; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 76.

47. Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103:2/3 (2004), 302.

48. Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization”, *October* 61 (1992), 60.

49. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 35.