

***Comparative Analysis of Foucault's "What is an Author?" and Jung Dae Yoon's Korean Television Series "W: Two Worlds Apart"***

Sanjukta Chakraborty, Amity University, India  
Prachi Behrani, Amity University, India  
Aarushi Upadhyay, Amity University, India  
Dhritiman Chakraborty, University of Warwick, United Kingdom

The Korean Conference on Arts & Humanities 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This research conducts a comparative analysis between Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" and Jung's K-Drama "W: Two Worlds Apart", aiming to explore contemporary visual storytelling's reflection of Foucault's ideas on authorship and narrative agency. Foucault's essay challenges traditional notions of authorship, advocating for a focus on the discursive formations surrounding writers and their texts. "W: Two Worlds Apart", which blends elements of Foucault's theories, offers a fertile ground for inquiry with its exploration of parallel universes, meta-narratives, and the interplay between creator and creation. The research design employs a qualitative approach, using textual analysis to examine the narrative structures and thematic content of both Foucault's essay and the television series. This involves a detailed examination of the series' episodes and Foucault's text to identify how the concepts of authorial control, narrative manipulation, and audience engagement are presented and interwoven. Through this comparative analysis, the study elucidates how Jung's narrative strategies intersect with Foucauldian concepts such as the author-function and textual plurality. The research draws from interdisciplinary insights in media studies, cultural theory, and philosophy to contribute to ongoing discussions about the fluidity of authorship and the negotiation of meaning in visual media. By pinpointing convergences and divergences between Foucault's theoretical propositions and Jung's televisual narrative, the study offers fresh perspectives on the dynamics of authorship, textuality, and audience reception in contemporary television storytelling. This research provides new perspectives and ideas for the study of modern communication media, demonstrating significant theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Foucault, *What is An Author?*, Korean Television Series, Culture Theory, Literary Theory, Media Studies

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has seen a steady rise in the production and popularity of cinematic adaptations of authorial creativity. Particularly, thanks to the phenomenon of the ‘Hallyu Wave’, there has been a sudden exponential increase in the quality and viewership of South Korean Television (Kim, 2007; Yang, 2012). One such Television Series is Jung’s popular K-Drama *W: Two Worlds Apart*. This research conducts a comparative analysis between Michel Foucault’s essay *What is an Author?* and Jung’s K-Drama *W: Two Worlds Apart*, aiming to explore contemporary visual storytelling’s reflection of Foucault’s ideas on authorship and narrative agency. Foucault’s essay challenges traditional notions of authorship, advocating for a focus on the discursive formations surrounding writers and their texts. *W: Two Worlds Apart*, which blends elements of Foucault’s theories, offers a fertile ground for inquiry with its exploration of parallel universes, meta-narratives, and the interplay between creator and creation.

The research design employs a qualitative approach, using textual analysis to examine the narrative structures and thematic content of both Foucault’s essay and the television series. This involves a detailed examination of some of the series’ characters and Foucault’s text to identify how the concepts of authorial control, narrative manipulation, and audience engagement are presented and interwoven. Through this comparative analysis, the study elucidates how Jung’s narrative strategies intersect with Foucauldian concepts such as the author-function and textual plurality (Foucault, 2019).

*W: Two Worlds Apart* revolves around Oh Yeon-joo, a doctor who is constantly being transported into the pages of her father, Oh Seong-moo’s, Webtoon novel. While within the story, she finds that the protagonist of the novel, Kang Cheol, is repeatedly being attacked by a faceless assassin, and that he is able to narrowly, miraculously escape death’s door time and time again simply with his wits and the strength of his indomitable will. These heroic qualities make Kang Cheol a memorable character for the audience. Protagonists who depict a strong emotional catharsis are “relatable to the audience even after decades of their initial creation” (Chakraborty et al., 2024). Additionally, whatever changes she makes while she is within the storyboard is seen to be updated in the final publication of the current chapter online. It is slowly found that it was actually Oh Seong-moo, the author of the novel, who was constantly trying to kill his own creation, his own protagonist. Some of these situations are further analysed through the lens of Foucault’s *What is an Author?* to further grasp the endurance of literary theory which is being reflected even in the media of a culture which is distanced both in terms of time and geography.

The research draws from interdisciplinary insights in media studies, cultural theory, and literary theory to contribute to ongoing discussions about the fluidity of authorship and the negotiation of meaning in visual media. By pinpointing convergences and divergences between Foucault’s theoretical propositions and Jung’s televisual narrative, the study offers fresh perspectives on the dynamics of authorship, textuality, and audience reception in contemporary television storytelling. This research provides new perspectives and ideas for the study of modern communication media, demonstrating significant theoretical and practical implications.

## Discussion

Michel Foucault's essay *What Is an Author?* delves into the role of the 'author' in shaping the text and influencing its reception by the audience. The author's initial intent, along with the audience's interpretation, plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of any given work. Although Foucault wrote this essay in 1969, his insights remain relevant and influential in today's world. In contemporary society, media has emerged as a dominant source of both information and entertainment, with numerous adaptations of literary works. As modern cinema continues to produce innovative and captivating stories, it is essential to examine how literary theories from the past continue to shape and influence current visual and written publications.

### The Author Function

Jung's *W: Two Worlds Apart* appears to directly mirror the five key points outlined by Foucault in his essay on the functions of an author. Foucault asserts that the 'presence' of an author's name is "functional in that it serves as a means of classification" (Smith, 2016). However, in Hurley's translation of Foucault's essay, it is noted that "today's writing has freed itself" allowing the text to exist independently of the author, "without being restricted to the confines of its interiority" (Foucault, 2019). Foucault describes the author as "a figure who is outside the text, and who precedes the text (and creates it)," with a focus on "creating an opening" in the discourse (Weinstein, 1997). The "exalted emotions related to the act of composition" extend beyond merely putting pen to paper; the author "is always working against grammatical rules and structures" to achieve immortality through their work (Weinstein, 1997).

In contrast, while an author's name can grant a certain immortality to a work (Foucault, 2019), in the cinematic world of *W: Two Worlds Apart*, Oh Seong-moo had not produced any other work before the success of this one, leaving no legacy. His creation was thus not bound by any structures or limitations. When Oh Seong-moo first attempts to kill his protagonist, Kang Cheol, by drawing him jumping off a bridge, he is shocked to discover that Kang Cheol clings to the rails, resisting his fictional death. This act of defiance awakens self-awareness and sentience in the character. Much like Milton's Satan, Kang Cheol depicts an indomitable will outside of his creators' designs. It was thus inevitable that Oh Seong-moo would re-enact God's anger, become enraged and attempt to destroy his creation when he is convinced that Kang Cheol is a 'monster' (Chakraborty et al., 2023).

### Authorship as a Social Construct

The second aspect of Foucault's discourse examines the relationship between society and the author. Foucault suggests that the "history of a concept, a literary genre, or a branch of philosophy" becomes an integral part of the text an author produces (Smith et al., 2016). This indicates that authorship extends beyond the individual writer, functioning as a social construct influenced by historical, cultural, and institutional factors (Chakraborty et al., 2024). However, the concept of the author changes over time, reflecting shifts in social norms and power dynamics. Smith et al. (2016) even argue that "these concerns assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his works". This evolution is evident in Jung's work, where Oh Seong-moo gains confidence as his audience begins to appreciate his creations. Initially, as the author, he was merely an observer, satisfied with his work. He is intended to be "outside the text," to "precede" it as he

“creates” it (Smith et al., 2016). However, as the narrative progresses, the author transforms into an omniscient figure determined to destroy his own creation.

### **The Death of the Author**

Foucault challenges the conventional idea of the author as the primary source of a text’s meaning, proposing that the focus should shift away from the author’s intentions and identity to the discourse itself. This shift allows for a broader range of interpretations and meanings to emerge from the text. In this view, the author is no longer the central figure in defining the text’s identity; instead, the text, as a product of the author’s imagination, begins to take on a life of its own. Weinstein (1997) explains that Foucault is “deconstructing” the notion of the author as the origin of something original, replacing it with the concept that the “author” is actually a product or function of the text. Essentially, the “author is decentred, shown to be only a part of the structure, a subject position, and not the centre” (Weinstein, 1997). In this context, Oh Seong-moo starts to breathe more life into his fictional character, while the author experiences a “voluntary obliteration of the self” (Smith et al., 2016).

Weinstein (1997) further argues that, according to Foucault, “rather than guaranteeing immortality, or keeping death away, writing ‘kills’ the author”. In the cinematic adaptation, this idea is literally manifested as the author’s interpretation of his own work leads him down a path of moral decay and to despise his protagonist. Foucault claims that the “work which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer” (Foucault, 2019). It is “[the author’s] link to death which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing” (Smith, 2016). This concept is vividly illustrated in the cinematic adaptation when Kang Cheol attempts to kill his creator, Oh Seong-moo, in order to free himself from the restrictive confines of his creator’s narrative. Ultimately, it is Oh Seong-moo’s jealousy and narcissism that lead to his demise in the show. As Weinstein (1997) emphasizes, “by declaring the death of the author,” Foucault is “deconstructing” the idea of the author as the origin of creativity or originality and replacing it with the idea that the “author” is simply a product or function of the text.

### **The Author and the Text**

The relationship between the author and the text is intricate and layered. Foucault posits that the author is not the sole architect of meaning, but rather a component of a broader network of discursive practices. He asserts that “the general conditions of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds” (Foucault, 2019) play a crucial role in shaping the text. This implies that a text should be viewed as a product of various influences, including cultural, social, and contemporary contexts. In the case of Oh Seong-moo, we observe a shift from his initial intentions to the final interpretation of the character he created. While the audience grew to admire the protagonist, the author’s feelings turned to disdain. As Weinstein (1997) suggests, the author is “shown to be only a part of the structure” when considered within the context of their work. This shift in perception drives Oh Seong-moo to continue writing the same story due to its popularity, which only exacerbates the decline of his already deteriorating moral compass. Foucault expands on this by stating that the “author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society” (2019).

This brings us to the next point – as the author begins to produce works driven by the popularity and demands of the audience, the originality and intent of the work become

compromised. Weinstein (1997) further explains that, according to Foucault, “rather than guaranteeing immortality, or keeping death away, writing ‘kills’ the author.” Oh Seong-moo’s decision to kill his protagonist stemmed from his desire for a perfect ending to his storyline. However, when he discovered that Kang Cheol was clinging to life with all his might, he could not accept that this two-dimensional, fictional character could defy his will. This illustrates the author’s moral decline, which could no longer tolerate the purity of his protagonist showing an intrinsic change in Oh Seong-moo’s very identity. In the cinematic adaptation, while the author does indeed meet a literal end, it is his interpretation of his own creation that leads him to despise his protagonists.

### **The Author Function in Different Discourse**

The role and significance of the author function vary across different types of discourse. For example, in scientific texts, the author function may be minimized, with more emphasis placed on the content and its accuracy, while literary texts often highlight the individuality and creativity of the author through “discursive practices” (Foucault, 2019). Foucault examines how these differences influence the interpretation and value of texts in various fields. In the context of the cinematic adaptation, which is not a scientific text, the focus shifts to the individuality and creativity of the author through these discursive practices.

It is the creativity of Oh Seong-moo, the author, that has brought about the individuality and self-awareness of the protagonist, Kang Cheol. The initial love and dedication that Oh Seong-moo invested in crafting and breathing life into Kang Cheol are what make him the beloved protagonist within the fictional narrative. The impact of such a remarkable, three-dimensional character is clearly reflected in the audience’s perception of him as charming and heroic. However, when the protagonist becomes intelligent and self-aware, Oh Seong-moo begins to devalue his creation, even to the point of despising him. According to Oh Seong-moo’s morally corrupt view, his creation had no right to defy his omniscient will. Here, we observe that Oh Seong-moo sees himself as the centre or the ‘Subject’, while Kang Cheol becomes merely the creation, the ‘Other’ in Oh Seong-moo’s mind (de Beauvoir, 2007). Oh Seong-moo could not accept that this two-dimensional, fictional character could act against his intentions.

This also illustrates the author’s moral decline, as he can no longer uphold the purity and perfection of his own protagonist. Although Oh Seong-moo initially feels pride and happiness in the positive reception of his work, he starts to feel sidelined as the audience’s attention shifts more toward his creation than toward him. Ultimately, it is Oh Seong-moo’s jealousy and narcissism that drive him to take the extreme step of killing his own creation.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that the points Foucault made remain as relevant today as they were when he first articulated them. These concepts are represented almost verbatim in modern popular media and television, even in countries far removed from their original cultural context.

This research integrates insights from media studies, cultural theory, and literary theory to enrich ongoing discussions about the fluidity of authorship and the negotiation of meaning in visual media. By identifying the alignments between Foucault’s theoretical frameworks and Jung’s televisual narrative, the study offers new perspectives on the dynamics of authorship, textuality, and audience engagement in contemporary television storytelling. It presents novel

insights and concepts for the study of modern communication media, with significant theoretical and practical implications.

The cinematic adaptation of *W: Two Worlds Apart* serves as a compelling exploration of the author function as defined by Foucault. Through the characters of Oh Seong-moo and his creation, Kang Cheol, the series delves deep into the complexities of authorship, creativity, and the relationship between a creator and their work. Kang Cheol's individuality and self-awareness, along with the audience's emotional connection to him, emphasize the enduring relevance of the author function in creative discourses. This dynamic ultimately highlights the power of storytelling and the intricate interplay between author, text, and audience in shaping meaning and interpretation.

## References

- Chakraborty, S., Chakraborty, D., Gulati, V., & Prasad, P. (2023). Comparative Analysis of Ambition in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Milton's Paradise Lost. *Specialusis Ugdymas*, 1.44, 710-720.
- Chakraborty, S., Gulati, V., & Sharma, D. (2024). Comparative Analysis of Fear in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Miyazaki's Chihiro. *Ad Alta: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 14.1.
- Chakraborty, S., Gulati, V., & Sharma, D. (2024). Comparative Analysis of Sorrow in Shakespeare's Juliet and Homer's Andromache. *Literatūra*, 66.3.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2007). The second sex. *Understanding Inequality: the intersection of race/ethnicity, class, and gender*, 75-82.
- Foucault, M. (2019). *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. Penguin UK.
- Kim, J. (2007). Why does Hallyu matter? The significance of the Korean wave in South Korea. *Critical Studies in Television*, 2.2, 47-59.
- Smith, S. B. (2016). *Modernity and its discontents: making and unmaking the bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow*. Yale University Press, 299-314.
- Weinstein, D. (1997). Michel Foucault: What is an Author? *DePaul University*.
- Yang, J. (2012). The Korean wave (Hallyu) in East Asia: A comparison of Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese audiences who watch Korean TV dramas. *Development and society*, 41.1, 103-147.

**Contact email:** sanjukta.chakraborty@s.amity.edu