The Painter's Hand and Hitchcock's Silhouette: A Study of Signatures

Wieland Schwanebeck

Introduction

In his childhood memoir, *Flaschendrehen* ('Spin-the-Bottle', 2003), author Jess Jochimsen looks back on the day that he walked into a store and saw a copy of one of his books for the first time. Jochimsen states that he nearly burst with pride:

I asked the shop assistant for a pen and signed the book. "What are you up to?" the shop assistant barked at me. "It's mine," I proudly responded. "That'll be 17.50," he said. "No – I wrote this book!" "Anyone can say that." I produced my identity card and said that I just wanted to make the book more attractive for customers. "Well, no one's gonna buy it like this," he responded. "It might be worth a lot in a hundred years." "As for now, it is damaged."

Thus, when I saw a copy of my own book in a bookstore for the first time, I was forced to pay for it. (Jochimsen 22, my translation)

Jochimsen's anecdote is a fitting introduction to the signature conundrum which this essay will try and interrogate from several different angles: if done in the appropriate context, signatures are possibly the most powerful signifiers in circulation (and they can, indeed, make books "more attractive," as Jochimsen suggests); if they are not required (or misread, or illegible, or if their authenticity is put into question), however, they are "damaged" signatures which are not worth anything.¹

It may appear redundant to point out to what degree we rely on arbitrary conventions, but few constellations could illustrate this state of

¹ A variation on the same theme occurs in Jason Reitman's film, *Young Adult* (2011), written by Diablo Cody. The protagonist (Charlize Theron), a down-and-out author of young adult fiction whose successful days are behind her, furiously attempts to sign copies of her work in a local bookstore, only to be kicked out by the clerk who does not want to see the goods damaged.
affairs as well as signatures. Documents become legally binding on the basis of signatures, although they do not represent genuinely indexical signs, but rather "cultural man-sign[s]" which, unlike more natural indices (such as skin), can be forged, as Claude Gandelman points out (76). Thus, when measured against the amount of power invested in them and the firm belief that they mark things "at the level of their pure existence" (Agamben 66), the authenticity of signatures appears quite fragile, seeing that signatures do not even indicate a form of so-called primary contact which characterizes "natural 'man-sign[s]'," like finger-prints (ibid.). It goes without saying that it is in the nature of signs to represent, i.e. to differ by nature from the signified itself – no matter what you leave behind on a document, be it a thumb-print or your initials in writing, it is but a proxy of yourself. Still, signatures stand out from the many ways in which we represent ourselves, marked (as they are) by a reputation of being somewhat more authentic than other conventions. As Giorgio Agamben points out, the signature does not "merely express a semiotic relation between a signans and a signatum," but it "displaces and moves it into another domain, thus positioning it in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations" (40). The complexity of this network of relations is dizzying, to say the least, and it is the aim of the subsequent analysis to untangle it and to outline some of its paradoxical features. Coming from a literary studies background, I will draw upon numerous literary examples in order to illustrate the key points, as well as some examples taken from popular culture.

This essay consists of three main parts (and one post-scriptum): I will start my analysis by outlining a couple of terms and developments which inform the contemporary understanding of signature and its diverse metaphorical dimensions ("Signature-mania"). In this context, I will elaborate on the role which signatures play as markers of identification, and attempt to describe the particular alchemy surrounding them. I will also dedicate a few passages to the problematic category of the authentic, of which the (artistic) signature is believed to be an immediate expression, and contemplate the artistic field in more detail, focusing on the allegedly ancestral domain of signatures: painting.

In the second part ("The Logic of Repetition"), the theoretical focus will shift towards a deconstructive approach to signatures as laid down by Jacques Derrida, who examined the signature problem in a number of his writings. I will characterize the transition from literal signatures to the metaphorical dimensions of the topic and reflect on its wider implications. This chapter will also look into the autograph market as an illustration of the numerous paradoxical aspects highlighted by Derrida.
The third chapter ("The Auteur's Mighty Signature: Alfred Hitchcock") will offer a case study of the signature metaphor in the area of film, in order to illustrate the various problems and contradictions that have been outlined in the theoretical parts. The object of this case-study is Alfred Hitchcock, whose powerful signature not only outlived him and still works as a brand in his name, but which also overshadows interpretations of his œuvre to this day.

Ultimately, I will link the signature debate with the topic of gender and stress the importance of several telling parallels between rhetorical strategies at work in the signature discussion and the cultural negotiations surrounding gender (and masculinity in particular). This part will tie in with numerous points of the auteur discussion and highlight the significance of signatures as markers of a gendered form of authenticity, suggesting that everyone who participates in this process is sometimes, like the narrator in Jochimsen's autobiographical story, "forced to pay."

My attempt to gather findings from a great number of academic fields and contemporary discussions will try to cut an inroad into what is a truly vast topic – some of the greatest minds of twentieth century-philosophy (such as Jacques Derrida or Giorgio Agamben) have contributed writings and lectures to the signature debate, and the topic continues to be of interest to scholars, with recent publications focusing on the complexity and diversity of signatures in the history of painting (cf. Rubin; Gludovatz 2011), their status in the age of digital media (cf. Neef, van Dijck and Ketelaar), their role in the field of religion and hermeneutics (Agamben 41-54), the implications of the signature conundrum for auteur discussions (cf. Braddock and Hock), and the relevance of tattoos as signatures applied to the body (cf. Pritchard; Neef).

Signature-mania: About a Cultural Obsession

Handwriting and the Alchemy of Names

In his second adventure, The Sign of Four (1890), master sleuth Sherlock Holmes adds another skill to his impressive résumé that already includes the likes of chemistry, toxicology, anatomy and fencing, by declaring himself an expert on handwriting. Holmes claims that he can deduce viable information on a suspect's character just by studying "this fellow's scribble" (Sign 17). Whilst Watson muses that the regularity and legibility of the
signature in question hints to "[a] man of business habits and some force of character" (17), Holmes arrives at a very different conclusion:

"Look at his long letters," he said. "They hardly rise above the common herd. That d might be an a, and that l an e. Men of character always differentiate their long letters, however illegibly they may write. There is vacillation in his k's and self-esteem in his capitals." (18)

Though the mysterious stranger who has been sending Holmes's client, Miss Mary Morstan, an anonymous letter tries to disguise his handwriting, to Holmes, "there can be no question as to the authorship," as "the irrepressible Greek e will break out, and see the twirl of the final s" (16). In the Sherlockian universe, i.e. in the late Victorian era, the traditional belief that a person's handwriting betrays the character is still intact, and Holmes's deductions rely on all the traditional qualities associated with a person's handwriting: "authenticity, uniqueness, and personality" (Neef and van Dijck 7). There are several stories in the official Holmes canon where the solution depends on this stable relationship. In "The Reigate Squires" (1893), Holmes may claim to "make a point of never having any prejudices and of following docilely wherever fact may lead me" (Adventures 391), yet his treatment of a handwritten document in the very same adventure speaks a different language. When asked how he came to suspect a father-son duo, the Cunninghams, Holmes points out that an important document, which has been written "by two persons doing alternate words" (ibid.), does, in fact, betray the relationship between its authors: "I am sure that you cannot fail to be delighted with the traces of heredity shown in the p's and in the tails of the g's. The absence of the i-dots in the old man's writing is also most characteristic" (396).

Holmes's method is in line with scientific discourse of his time, as the importance of clues and seemingly innocuous details is emphasized in disciplines as diverse as criminology, art history, and psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century. Hereditary tendencies appear most pronounced in the nightmarish scenarios envisioned by Conan Doyle and his contemporaries. They culminate in the then-fashionable belief in atavism, i.e. evolutionary throwbacks revealed in characters like the convict Selden (The Hound of the Baskervilles, 1902), whose "brutal and violent nature" (Hound 93) Dr. Watson fears even before their face-to-face encounter. The convict's "terrible animal face" reminds the narrator of "old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hillsides" (96), which seems sufficient to justify Selden's all too avoidable death. The more refined throwback in the same story, Stapleton (the
villain), appears more in control of his savage nature and acts the part of the civilized entomologist. However, in the Sherlockian universe, genetics remains a powerful force: Stapleton's identity is revealed through family resemblance: "an interesting instance of a throwback," Holmes reasons, "which appears to be both physical and spiritual" (138). The criminal may for some time succeed in deceiving his environment, yet ultimately, his real nature will reveal itself, and in this respect, signatures provide just as much circumstantial evidence as physiognomic details.

It was Giovanni Morelli, an Italian art historian, who brought a radically new approach to the field of attribution which was then adopted by other disciplines. For "instead of focusing attention, as art historians had until that point, on more visible stylistic and iconographic characteristics, Morelli examined insignificant details like ear lobes, the shape of fingers and toes," arguing that the authentic individuality of the artist was most likely to emerge in the place "where stylistic control loosens up in the execution of secondary details" (Agamben 69). Thus, the scene of the crime can be read like a Renaissance painting, as the culprit is bound to reveal his very own and unique style (Osterwalder 73). In the second (and last) Holmes adventure to feature his nemesis, Professor James Moriarty, the detective solemnly declares that "a master hand" is behind the crime: "You can tell an old master by the sweep of his brush. I can tell a Moriarty when I see one" (Valley 216). Nowhere else do Holmes's remarkable abilities border so much on witchcraft as they do in his application of Morelli's doctrine to the solving of crimes, as "the clue represents the exemplary case of a signature that puts an insignificant or nondescript object in effective relation to an event (in this case, a crime, in Freud's case, a traumatic event) or to subjects (the victim, the murderer, the author of a painting)" (Agamben 70).

Morelli's influence was not to endure. In the field of art history, it was down to remarkable forgers like Elmyr de Hory and Eric Hebborn to invalidate the claim that, by applying the Morellian method, a painting's authenticity could be established with absolute certainty – moreover, modern criminology is a far cry from the genetic determinism at work in the adventures of the Victorian Age's most famous fictional detective. However, this is not to say that we have freed ourselves from the alchemy of handwriting. If anything, its power has multiplied, even in this very day and age, which has frequently been labeled as the Golden Age of forgery (Hebborn 76), for handwriting "has never disappeared in the wake of new technologies, but has always adjusted its use and meaning in the face of larger technological, social, and cultural transformations" (Neef and van Dijck 8).
The aura of handwriting is based on entrenched beliefs which, as I will show in the subsequent chapters, have managed to endure in spite of there being no rational justification for them. In this respect, handwriting's auratic dimension can be linked to a different form of alchemy that continues to puzzle some of the most brilliant minds: the alchemy of names. Though not to be confused with the signature discussion, it is closely linked to it as both aim to lend an almost transcendental quality to a conventionalized, yet somewhat arbitrary representation of the self. Eric Hebborn argues that the use and abuse of names is an everyday form of magic and that we use names like magic wands (58). As books, which feed their eager audiences with anagrammatic puzzles that instill the magic of names continue to be published, some of them have found their way into hermeneutical studies, such as Pontius Pilate's oft-quoted question, quid est veritas ("What is the truth?"). According to a well-known interpretation, it contains its own answer in anagrammatic form: est vir quid adest ("It is the man"), i.e. Jesus Christ (Thomas 146). In kabbalistic mysticism, the anagram even serves as one of four legitimate interpretative strategies to be applied to the Torah: "Names, facts and the like were interpreted as anagrams in order to gain prophecies about the future. According to kabbalistic belief, the letters of the alphabet are of divine origin, and beneath the surface of linguistic structures, God's name can be detected" (Thomas 151, my translation). It is fitting that Kabbalah is not only one of the major intertextual reference points for the most thorough and multi-layered fictional interrogation of the signature problem – Zadie Smith's novel *The Autograph Man* (2002) – but also exerts its influence in the writings of Jacques Derrida.

In its popularized contemporary form, the alchemy of names may be an unlikely descendant of the Kabbalah, yet we do find traces of these theological and philosophical origins in diverse manifestations, such as the popular belief that our DNA determines us all to be walking anagrams of genetic code (Thomas 169), or the idea that lexemes might, after all, not be quite as arbitrary as a modern, post-Saussurean linguistics would have us believe. Whole websites are dedicated to the exchange of inspired examples, and it takes but a few clicks to be absorbed by the anagrammatic meanings hidden in terms like *debit card* ('bad credit') or *mother-in-law* ('woman Hitler').

With the transfer of this principle to the field of names, the signature game climbs to even more absurd heights, as dedicated believers seem to read the news as though it was the *dramatis personae* of a Shakespeare play, with one eye on telling names. Admittedly, there is a funny coincidence in the fact that the director of the latest *Spider-Man* film is called Marc Webb, and that Clint Eastwood is an anagram for 'Old West Action'. All these would
count as manifestations of what Hegel termed Weltgeist, the idea that there is something like a fateful signature at work to provide interpretative clues, in spite of the fact that they are mostly down to culture- (or language- )bound conventions, i.e. arbitrariness. A rather hilarious example of this is provided in episode 6#2 of The Simpsons, "Lisa's Rival" (1995), in which Lisa tries to befriend the new girl in town, Wunderkind Alison Taylor. Alison's father, a professor, invites Lisa to play the family's anagram game, a thought exercise for bored intellectuals:

ALISON. We take proper names and rearrange the letters to form a description of that person.

PROFESSOR TAYLOR. Like, er, I don't know … Alec Guinness!

ALISON. [contemplates] Genuine class.

PROFESSOR TAYLOR. Ho, ho, very good. Alright, Lisa: Jeremy Irons.


PROFESSOR TAYLOR. Well, that's … very good … for a first try. You know what? I have a ball. Perhaps you'd like to bounce it?

Indeed, most of us will – like Lisa in that scene – be left flabbergasted by the little game and struggle to come up with examples of our own. Yet there seems to be an intellectual (and academic) school of thought that continues to stir the flame and to examine names for interpretative clues. One prominent representative of this can be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein, who at one point contemplates the names of canonical artists, and admits to the feeling that a certain overarching force is situated in their very names:

"Schubert" – It's as if the name were an adjective.

Neither can one say: "Look at all the things that 'fit'. For example, the name fits the bearer." […] [W]e are dealing here more or less with an illusion, a mirage.

We think we see something that isn't there. But this is true only more or less. – We know very well that the name "Schubert" does not stand in a relationship of fitting to its bearer and to Schubert's works; and yet we are under a compulsion to express ourselves in this way. (Wittgenstein 1998: § 69)

Wittgenstein reluctantly concedes that something gets the better of us here; in spite of the very rational idea that the link between a person's character and their name is but an arbitrary one, he cannot quite shake the belief that "the name Schubert fitted Schubert's works and his face" (1998: § 791), and that "[i]t is as if the name together with these works, formed a solid whole. If we see the name, the works come to mind, and if we think of the works, so
does the name" (1980: § 341). Of course, the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* does not succumb to that illusory belief as much as these passages would suggest. In a different paragraph, Wittgenstein hints at a solution himself when he points out that the image of a person is stored together with that person's name in our memory (1980: § 1-183), which results in the strange feeling that the two exist in a causal relationship. Similarly, we grow up to embody the names we have been given, until we – to quote an observation by Paul Auster – "we come to accept that we are the names we bear." (Auster and Coetzee 82)

The everyday alchemy of names and handwriting remains largely unaffected by such considerations. However, the following pages will try and shed some light on this cultural obsession, from a variety of perspectives. Ultimately, the idea that signatures amount to completely unambiguous, authentic signifiers has to be challenged, especially in the light of poststructuralist thought; for, as Sonja Neef and José van Dijck stress in their introduction to *Sign Here!* (2006), handwriting "can no longer be considered a stable and unitary source of authenticity, singularity and originality, since it is driven by difference" (Neef and van Dijck 17). In order to get some idea of this paradigm change, one need only take a look at the way in which the position of signatures has shifted in the realm of popular culture. Whilst they may still act the part of *corpus delicti* in the crime story (though their validity in court remains controversial, as we shall see), signatures have found a home in the impostor narrative, where they playfully subvert many of the assumptions on which Holmes was still able to rely without hesitation.

In stories dealing with impostors, con men and frauds, signatures are frequently invoked in order to expose the fragility of the social system and its functional markers of belonging. The sheer conventionality of signature is mercilessly exploited by the impostor, who is generally an expert in the procedures involved in naming and certification – the mechanisms that Bourdieu calls "act[s] of social magic" (119). Impostors use this knowledge in order to adapt to their social environment; quotidian negotiators in "a world in which identity is fixed and determined through a series of presumably infallible markers: a signature, fingerprints on a package, a passport photograph" (Cheever 122). The practicing of a new signature remains a staple episode in impostor narratives and often serves as means of affirming the character's skills. Patricia Highsmith's well-known fraud, Tom Ripley, even lists his ability to forge signatures as the first in an impressive (though very much exaggerated) list of his talents: "I can forge a signature, fly a helicopter, handle dice, impersonate practically anybody, cook – and do
a one-man show in a nightclub in case the regular entertainer's sick. Shall I go on?" (Talented 59) Amongst the various influential impostor texts published in the 1950s, Highsmith's first Ripley novel (The Talented Mr. Ripley, 1955) and Thomas Mann's Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man (1954) certainly stand out; it is no coincidence that the theme of forging signatures features in both of them. Thomas Mann's protagonist already exercises his talents in mimicry and (dis)simulation in school, where he regularly produces his father's handwriting in order to excuse his own absence. As is his wont, Krull dedicates an elaborate prose passage to the justification of this dubious habit and even demonstrates an artistic ethos in the process (he will pick the same strategy when justifying his other crimes):

> How tiresome to sign the same name to letters and papers all one's life long! The hand grows paralysed with irritation and disgust – what a pleasant refreshment and stimulation of the whole being comes, then, from being able to give oneself a new name and to hear oneself called by it! (Krull 46)

The impostor quickly overcomes his initial scruples\(^2\) and turns the forging of another man's signature into an artistic endeavor. This little practice – a finger exercise in the most literal sense of the word – allows him to dissociate himself from his old environment and to get used to the idea of being somebody else. Like Krull, who later puts his adaptable handwriting skills to good use when it comes to impersonating the Marquis de Venosta (in the character of whom he also produces lengthy letters to the Marquis' immediate family who suspect nothing), Tom Ripley relies on the commonly held assumption that signatures signal authenticity and that the relationship between signature and signed is "generally understood in terms of similarity" (Agamben 35f.), for what is similar can be imitated. One episode in The Talented Mr. Ripley provides an exemplary case, as it exposes nearly all the little fault-lines with which the whole discourse on signatures is brimming (and which will be addressed in the subsequent chapters). Having killed his friend Dickie Greenleaf during a trip to San Remo, Ripley takes Dickie's place and continues to live la dolce vita in Dickie's name in Italy, wearing the dead man's clothes and living on his allowance. When doubts arise as to the authenticity of Dickie's signature and the Italian bank informs Ripley that

\(^{2}\) Anthony Hope's Prisoner of Zenda (1894), Rudolf Rassendyll, at first rejects the idea that he could impersonate Ruritania's king and forge his signature. Rudolf insists that "I've not been bred a forger!" (44), yet he demonstrates a gift for producing the king's signature, and tellingly chooses a figural perspective in order to describe his efforts, which signals the way in which he distances himself from his own identity ("a very tolerable forgery did this versatile hero produce," 45).
their "Inspector of Signatures" (*Talented* 177), a metaphor for all institutionalized mechanisms of control at work here, is looking into the matter, Ripley is taken aback but retains his cool. Instead of giving himself up to the authorities, he exploits the contradictory nature of signature conventions. As the bank and the trust company offer him to have Dickie's permanent signature file replaced (they suspect forgery, but not that the person living as Dickie Greenleaf in Rome is, in fact, an impostor), Ripley simply writes himself a certificate of authentification (though he, the double, is in no position to do that) and thus guarantees that Dickie's signature is replaced by Tomas-Dickie's. Since no one can "commit a forgery against himself" (*Talented* 188), Ripley gets away with all his future forgeries, too, and he remains exceptionally proud of them ("they were such damned good forgeries," 179). In the novel's sequel, *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), the protagonist will show himself even more of a devoted artist when he formulates the artistic manifesto of forgery. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the bank episode is followed by Ripley's ultimate triumph: having risked everything and, possibly, too much by writing Dickie's last will (in which he, needless to say, leaves all of Dickie's fortune to himself), Ripley's luck seems to run out as his various lies threaten to catch up with him. However, it is his artistic ambition which turns out to be his rescue: the police find a vault in which Ripley has (in Dickie's name) deposited some paintings done by Ripley, though signed with Dickie's name. The fingerprints and the signatures on the paintings are compared to those on the checks and on the testament, all to Ripley's advantage, for he simply makes use of the fundamental weakness of the verification process. The Morellian (and, by implication, Freudian) notion that "our small unconscious gestures [...] betray the secret of our character" (Agamben 69) may be all nice and well, but completely useless if the interpretation of that secret hinges on a faulty prototype which has been tampered with.

In the hour of his *deus ex machina* triumph (the police off his trail, Dickie's money about to become his forever), Ripley himself finds this almost too good to be true, and he has to cling to the same markers and conventions whose dubious nature has just been exposed by his own crimes – only by looking at the official stationery of the Greenleaf company ("[it] felt authentic," 272) does he actually believe in his triumph. Evidently, the signature is firmly in the grasp of an all-permeating concept at work in the discourse on signatures: the notion of authenticity.

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3 In the sequel, Ripley becomes entangled in a network of art forgery and kills the only person who suspects foul play. Before he disposes of him, Ripley attempts to defend the practice of forgery against the other man's accusations and ironically even plagiarizes somebody else's words when he claims that forgers are capable of "genuine achievement" (*Ground* 64).
Interrogating Authenticity

With *The Talented Mr. Ripley*'s unlikely happy ending, the notion of the authentic returns to its original meaning, as the (false) verification of the signature leads to Dickie's ultimate extinction: his testament verified and legally sanctioned when he is declared dead. This constellation reflects the etymology of the term authenticity and its original "violent meanings which are explicit in the [word's] Greek ancestry" (Trilling 122): the original Greek denotation (*auto-entes*) is linked to the problem of claiming truth, i.e. having done something by one's own hand, particularly in the most archaic sense of the term: the act of killing.\(^4\) This means that in a very narrow sense of the term, one can only call something authentic if one is actually responsible for it, which implies a degree of freedom and autonomy.\(^5\) Derrida argues that, unlike the mere act of writing one's name, the gesture of signature takes on the sense of *yes*, this is my name, I certify this, and, *yes*, *yes*, I will be able to attest to this again. I will remember later, I promise, that it is really I who signed. A signature is always a *yes, yes*, the *synthetic* performative of a promise and a memory conditioning every commitment. (1992: 279)

We cannot claim with absolute certainty that something is authentic if we have not done it ourselves. However, the term soon was to undergo a semantic transformation that saw the gap between one's own doing and the mere confirmation of someone else's doing widen (Neumann 93), and people began to understand *authentéo* not just in the sense of killing someone with one's own hand, but also in the sense of signing death warrants, of having "full power over [someone's life]" (Trilling 122). As a consequence, *authentéo* increasingly refers to the act of exerting authority over someone, whereas *authentikos* retains the immediate link to the agent of an action and is, as Eleonore Kalisch stresses, linked to *cheirographia*: hand-writing (32). The *authenthéo* becomes a representative sign of power and authority which allows one to delegate authenticity to others and to use the term as a value judgment without having necessarily been personally involved. This opens the term towards what Derrida will later address as the problem of

\(^4\) Out of the sheer multitude of research on the etymology of authenticity, see Kalisch 32; Amrein 9; Wetzel 50f.; Knaller 18f.

\(^5\) In her historical account of the discourse on authenticity, Eleonore Kalisch points out that *authentes* is only granted to those who are completely free and able to carry responsibility for their own actions (34f.). This is reflected in the original Greek application of the term: there were only five genuinely *authentic* text-types (handwriting, certificate of debt, testament, contract, and letter).
communication *in absentia* – the signifier paradoxically turns into a means of authentication in spite of someone’s absence and is read as "the most obvious and elementary form of writing [and] self-expression" (Keskinen 293), or even "'the essential' aspect of identity" (Pritchard 342). The fact that signatures become a means of delegating and representing power also allows them to gain importance in legal discourse: the idea of demanding a personal signature under a contract is well-known in Roman civil law, and the prophet Jeremiah writes of a similar practice that occurred in Palestine.\(^6\) Many other examples could be cited to stress the importance granted to signatures: it is in appending them "that one can in our culture most authoritatively take responsibility for an utterance. By signing a document one intends its meaning and seriously performs the signifying act it accomplishes" (Culler 1989: 125).

Take the example of letter-writing: historically, signatures became more powerful as they ceased to be a matter of course, for instance when, in ancient Rome, the upper classes employed slaves whose sole task was to sign their masters’ correspondence (Ganz 282). The tradition appears to have found some continuation in the practice of using *secretarials* that populate the contemporary autograph market (Ramseier 48) and which remain the occasional subject of controversy, as in the case of former US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who had made use of autopens to sign letters of condolences addressed to the relatives of US soldiers killed during the Gulf War (Hudson). However, as the more ancient examples demonstrate, there is no reason to cherish the idea that, before the dawn of the (post-)modern age, the authenticity of handwriting was a less heatedly debated topic. Nothing could be further from the truth: right from the beginning, the possibility of forgery was part of the signature’s fundamental condition. How else could we account for the fact that even back in Cicero’s day age, it was the seal, and not the signature which served as a legally binding guarantee of authenticity and was the preferred notarial practice? (Ganz 284; Rubin 571) Indeed, were one to look into the history of signatures and the practices involved in using them and attributing importance to them, it would become obvious that their history cannot be told without narrating the history of forgery at the same time. It reveals some

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\(^6\) "So I took the evidence of the purchase, *both* that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open: And I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, in the sight of Hanameel mine uncle's *son*, and in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison" (Jeremiah 32,11-12).
telling paradoxes: the only work by Michelangelo that bears his signature\(^7\) is one whose authenticity is doubted these days (Burg 184). This essay offers no room to provide a detailed account of signature discourse in the history of art; suffice to say that there is no lack of examples to challenge the idea that the pre-modern era was less prone to forgery than our day and age. To quote but one other example, in the medieval period, scholars used to adopt a different style of handwriting in order to lend more importance to their correspondence, which means that the degree of originality (of thought) is judged in accordance with a decidedly stylized signature (Ganz 293f.).

These contradictions notwithstanding, signatures very much enjoy a privileged status, as the high degree of conventionality involved is hardly ever held against them. From all the various debates and controversies, signatures (and the notion of the authentic) have emerged even more powerful. This status is not even questioned if one considers how the idea of authenticity is established in the first place. Usually, we compare a signature to an established original (e.g. the signature in a person's ID card), and we judge on the basis of similarity:

This is the enigmatic originality of every paraph. For the attachment to the source to occur, the absolute singularity of an event of the signature and of a form of the signature must be retained: the pure reproducibility of a pure event (Derrida 1991: 107).

This very elementary paradox – "How does the cashier know that I am in a legitimate position to use my credit card? Because I copy myself" (von Gehlen 65, my translation) – produces several problematical implications which no discursive field manages to fully resolve, least of all the autograph business which demands that its participants negotiate their ways around a number of propositions that are impossible to reconcile, that is, to produce items that are unique on the one hand (for what looks too similar is bound to arouse suspicion regarding the involvement of mechanical means of reproduction, as Donald Rumsfeld had to find out the hard way), yet sufficiently similar to a given sample on the other. In addition, a person's signature is subject to change, due to a number of factors like age, health, context, the writing implement. In other words: finding the perfect signature amounts to squaring the circle, as this signature "must carry with it a capacity to be repeated in principle again and again in all sorts of contexts

\(^7\) The Pietà in St. Peter's Basilica (Vatican City) bears a signature on the sash which runs across the Virgin Mary's chest; Patricia Rubin characterizes this trope of modesty as an "early gambit in Michelangelo's own bid for divinity" (565).
Wieland Schwanebeck

[...], at the same time as being in some way singular every time" (Royle 68). This paradoxical aim is manifest in what Jacques Derrida calls *iterability*,\(^8\) entailing both repetition and alterity in spite of "the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees [...] for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible" (Derrida 1991: 90).

The signature principle thus requires a leap of faith, if not speculation on behalf of the addressee. In Zadie Smith’s novel *The Autograph Man*, a book which ties the signature theme together with questions of faith and religiosity, this connection is emphasized repeatedly: since autographs are not to be conventionally decoded (the pragmatic requirements of a typical signature are not the same as that of an autograph, not just because many celebrities sign with pseudonyms), their claim for authenticity demands not just a dedicated fan, but a devoted believer willing to accept signatures as metonymies of actual celebrities. The value of an autograph is not assessed with regard to conventional forms of authenticity or legal verification: instead, the signifier carries with it an additional dimension in the sense of connotation (Barthes 90-2).

Moreover, it appears remarkable that what we deem an authentic signature very often has little to do with the criterion of legibility. In reality, our signatures will not only deviate but, depending on the context, often appear illegible (and thus not be helpful in verifying our identity) for anyone who does not know our signature and our identity anyway. Artists like American painter Robert Longo are even free to admit that a signature is "not meant to be read but recognized," so that his own may appear illegible, but does the trick – by being "pretty" (qtd. in Haus 165). In *The Meaning of Liff* (1983), their dictionary of "things that there aren’t any words for yet," British authors Douglas Adams and John Lloyd have dedicated one entry to this phenomenon, which they term the *Albuquerque*: it designates "[t]he shapeless squiggle which is utterly unlike your normal signature, but which is, nevertheless, all you are able to produce when asked formally to identify yourself" (Adams and Lloyd 226). The *Albuquerque* is the fitting emblem for a rather uncanny situation – just consider for a moment how much power is (potentially) attributed to signatures in legal discourse, although this convention is in no way justified by scientific expertise. Nowadays, American courts may accept sample comparisons and hear expert testimonies on features such as a person’s stroke style and the shape of letters, but the practice remains highly controversial. Not only can all signatures theoretically be forged, but the analysis of handwriting is related to the field of graphology and its "unproven claim that a person’s character can be read

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\(^8\) Derrida derives the term from Sanskr. *itara* (other) and Lat. *iter* (again) (1991: 90).
in a scientific manner from an autograph sample" ("Pressure" 72). Moreover, psychological studies have shown that people tend to alter their signatures, depending on the context, and that they employ a "more formal signature" when under supervision (Hendrick et al. 1) – British actor and author Stephen Fry, for one, admits in his autobiography that he adapted a particularly affected signature in his youth, a habit he found impossible to shake: "[T]he conscious manner we decide to sign our names in our teens will slowly stop being affected and become our real signature. The mask if worn long enough will be the face" (Fry 88f.). Still, the common myth that a person's handwriting is a reliable indicator of that person's authentic character prevails. By putting this stereotype on its head, Donald Barthelme produces a memorable punchline in his short-story, "Margins" (1964). Here, the protagonist is advised to change his handwriting instead of bothering to improve his personality:

"No," Edward said, "don't bother improving your character. Just improve your handwriting. Make larger capitals. Make smaller loops in your 'y' and your 'g.' Watch your word-spacing so as not to display disorientation. Watch your margins."
"It's an idea. But isn't that kind of a superficial approach to the problem?"

(Stories 13)

Many authors have addressed the fundamental contradictions at work here, as the hollowness at the heart of a commonly accepted method of verifying identity makes for humorous reading, no matter if the focus is on the perpetrators or on the duped. Shakespeare has demonstrated that the forging of signatures can be exploited both for tragic consequences and for its comedic potential. The former is illustrated in King Lear (1606), where Edmund's whole conspiracy is based on the forging of his brother Edgar's handwriting, in order to deceive old Gloucester:

GLOUCESTER. You know the character to be your brother's?
EDMUND. If the matter were good, my lord, I durst swear it were his; but, in respect of that, I would fain think it were not.
GLOUCESTER. It is his.
EDMUND. It is his hand, my lord; but I hope his heart is not in the contents.

(King Lear, 1.2)

Malvolio in Twelfth Night (1602), on the other hand, falls victim to a comedic ploy initiated by Sir Toby and his friends. Malvolio ends up making a fool of
himself because he all too willingly buys into the idea that Olivia has written him a personal letter: "By my life, this is my lady's hand! these be her very C's, her U's, and her T's; and thus makes she her great P's. It is, in contempt of question, her hand" (Twelfth Night, 2.5). The lover invests in the idea that there is a metonymical relationship between signature and scripter. Malvolio's descendants are everywhere, and they are indicative of a culture which still mistakes a signifying practise that is down to sheer attribution for an expression of essence, of genuine personality. For someone in love, the other's signature can amount to an erotic, almost physical encounter, as the characters in Philip Roth's novels frequently find out. When Marcus Messner, the love-stricken narrator of Indignation (2008), receives a letter from the girl he admires (another Olivia), he is completely taken with the idea that her personality must become manifest in her signature:

I had never before seen her handwriting or how she signed her name with the nib of that pen, the narrow way she formed the 'O', the strange height at which she dotted the two 'i's, the long graceful upswept tail at the end of the concluding 'a'. I put my mouth to the page and kissed the 'O.' Kissed it and kissed it. Then, impulsively, with the tip of my tongue I began to lick the ink of the signature, patiently as a cat at his milk bowl I licked away until there was no longer the 'O,' the 'I,' the 'i,' the 'v,' the second 'i,' the 'a' – licked until the upswept tail was completely gone. I had drunk her writing. I had eaten her name. I had all I could do not to eat the whole thing (Indignation 70f.).

Messner's attempt to eat up Olivia's signature demonstrates that he falls under the illusion of a corporeal presence, of genuine authenticity in the sense of "the presence of an individual writer during a historically unique moment of writing" (Neef and van Dijck 9). At the other end of the specter we find someone falling out of love: Alexander Portnoy, the infamous protagonist of Roth's masterpiece, Portnoy's Complaint (1969). Portnoy frequently falls for women who are intellectually inferior to him, such as the aptly named "Monkey," whose limited intellectual capacities both turn him on and cause him to despise her. Not only does the fact that she "thinks you spell 'dear' with three letters" reflect her feeble personality for Portnoy, but her handwriting itself ostentatiously betrays a lack of education:
What hopeless calligraphy! It looked like the work of an eight-year-old – it nearly drove me crazy! Nothing capitalized, nothing punctuated – only those oversized irregular letters of hers slanting downward along the page, then dribbling off. And printed, as on the drawings the rest of us carry home in our little hands from first grade! (Portnoy 184)

He will later contemplate splitting up with the Monkey after he has found a sample of her handwriting ("This woman is ineducable and beyond reclamation," 206). Evidently – and in spite of the fact that the signature merely represents an indexical trace of someone’s (past) proximity (Gludovatz 2011: 19), signatures are frequently functionalized in love and marriage plots.9 Letters act not just as a medium of communication but also as the guarantee of "complete accordance on paper" (Gludovatz 2011: 165, my translation), even if this accordance leads to the complete extinction of one individual style (such as Ottilie in Goethe’s 1809 novel, Elective Affinities, the example discussed by Gludovatz). Faced with such passionate, yet gullible fools like Messner and Portnoy, it does not come as a big surprise that Derrida, in his study of the signature phenomenon, occasionally felt himself reminded of bad movie plots (Bennington and Derrida 165). What appears increasingly hard to fathom in the scope of a theoretical interrogation into the problem of signatures is that, whilst the relationship between signature and signer is highly unstable, our very thorough infatuation with the idea of authenticity appears unperturbed. The general cultural convention is hardly one step above the mythical belief cherished by autograph hunters – who can be taken as anagram decipherers and collectors of relics in their own right. Not even in a postmodern age, which presents at least two very contrastive movements, articulating a desire for authenticity on the one hand, eulogizing authenticity in the age of mass media on the other:

Baudrillard, Derrida, and many others have tried for the longest time to convince us that reality, as the essential reference point for ontological, epistemological, and ethical existence, has forever been consigned beyond the pale of human representation; the only essence that postmodern thinking seems to accept is the fundamental gap between reality and its symbolic representation in language, images, or ideas. (Funk, Groß and Huber 10)

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9 Gludovatz reads Goya’s Portrait of the Duchess of Alba (1795) accordingly: here, the artist leaves his signature in the sand at the woman’s feet, painted in 1797 (2011: 145-88).
Theoretically, there is no denying that postmodernism had all but said a final goodbye to the idea of the authentic (Imesch 129), and that the twentieth century saw the gradual disappearance of normative notions of the authentic (Knaller 34). In practice however, authenticity has proven "consistently resilient to even the most fundamental criticism" (Funk, Groß and Huber 11) and has even been granted a merry afterlife, not least due to two contrastive forces which could not be further apart: the critical theory of the Frankfurt School on the one hand, and the language of advertising on the other. In Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (posth. 1970), authenticity becomes a key concept in order to qualify the work of art (Müller 60-5): it is the authenticity of the works which makes them legible, for they must carry a genuine historical signature insofar as they are tied to the technical standards of their time or must, to quote Adorno, "[sich] dem geschichtlichen Stoffgehalt ihrer Zeit vorbehaltlos und ohne die Anmaßung über ihr zu sein sich überantworten" (272).10 In this respect, Adorno is indebted to Walter Benjamin, whose mourning for the lost aura is all too evident in Adorno's somewhat arbitrary distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic (Müller 66). Needless to say, the latter is, in Adorno's diction, reserved for the products of mass culture, which makes it appear quite ironic that it was American popular culture of the post-war years which laid claim to having re-discovered the authentic. In a very influential essay on the history of advertising in the United States, Leo Spitzer has pointed out that only the English language knows such a diverse array of "prefixes which tend to unmask false values: pseudo-, sham-, make-believe, makeshift-, mock-, would-be-, fake-, phony-, semi-, near-, baloney-, synthetic-, etc." (qtd. in Orvell 146), and while I am not interested in pursuing the diverse implications of Spitzer's argument on popular culture, the paradox unveiled at the heart of it is illuminating. The moment in which post-war culture turned its back on authenticity and its "aura of genuineness, truthfulness, originality, immediacy" (Knaller and Müller 7, my translation), it was up to the world of advertising and its mechanisms of branding to lay claim to the concept and to promise the consumer "the real deal" (Orvell 144f.), conveniently at a time when post-war society began to suspect that the idea of individualism either hid behind a mask of phoniness or, worse, "no longer existed at all" (Cheever 7).

10 "The authentic work of art must bear the full weight of its historic background, without being so presumptuous as to believe itself above it."
Signatures in the Arts

Painters are most closely associated with the practice of signing when it comes to the field of arts. Signatures allow additional works of a similar style to be added to an artist’s œuvre, even if these works do not carry a signature. Tobias Burg identifies this elementary working principle at the heart of the artistic signature mode (11), and it is already in this kernel that we can observe a transition from the literal idea of signature towards a more metaphorical meaning, as the act of attribution always involves an implicit judgment in style, which already goes beyond the limits of verification. In Peter Carey's satirical novel, Theft: A Love Story (2006), which is set amongst painters and forgers, this fundamental contradiction is fully exploited, as the reader is informed that even paintings of only minor artistic merits will "later, with the signature added and some careful revision, become very valuable indeed" (Theft 29). Carey's forgers envision a paradisiac state in which they can "spend the rest of their lives signing unsigned canvases and revising abandoned works" (30); a fantasy that is interestingly shared by some real artists who are hailed as geniuses – Picasso is reported to have said that he did not mind forgeries as long as they were well made, for they might allow him to sit back and just sign what came his way (Gorris and Röbel 128).

Whatever period one looks at, "[o]ne cannot speak about one key function of signatures, neither in the Middle Ages, nor in the Modern Age. Signatures had to fulfill several functions at once, and thus they took many different shapes" (Burg 545, my translation). Consequently, even within the field of the visual arts, a working definition of signatures proves hard to find. For André Chastel, signatures comprise "toute indication sur l'auteur de l'œuvre fournie par un procédé signalétique autre que les ressources mêmes de l'art" (qtd. in Burg 13),\(^\text{11}\) which not only involves the signing with one's own name, but also monograms, amongst others. As the signature becomes part of the depicted scenery, its semiotic status is altered insofar as it is still of a scriptural nature, but "with a decidedly iconic character" that ultimately "questions its status as scripture" (Gludovatz 2005: 318, my translation). Although this study does not aim to give a comprehensive diachronic overview of the development of signatures in art history, some key developments and paradigms must be taken into consideration. Though it is the Renaissance which is often credited as the birthplace of the artistic signature, signatures are already to be found in ancient Greece, where they

\(^{11}\) "Any indication of the author of a piece of work that uses a method of signing which differs from the artistic means."
feature on pots and sculptures and do not just serve as trademarks, but already aim to establish a communication between the artist and the audience (cf. Osborne). One frequently cited legend comes to mind: allegedly, one Greek sculptor who was not allowed to sign his work took revenge by immortalizing his own features in his creation, so that their removal would have caused the whole structure to collapse.

The Middle Ages can no longer be seen as the signature-free zone which art historians have declared them to be for some time (Claussen 274). In fact, this period saw some fundamental changes in the handling of signatures, and they started to appear more often; not just on paintings, but in scripture, too. The monk Eadwine, author of the Canterbury Psalter, articulates this growing tendency in a pair of verses written in the twelfth century: "Scriptorum princeps ego, nec obitura deinceps / Laus mea ne fama, quis sim mea littera clama" (qtd. in Claussen 265).\(^\text{12}\) Arguably, the clear-cut dichotomy between the anonymous, pious creator of the medieval period and the great individual that arose later with the Age of Humanism does not hold up, though the motivational structure at work in applying signatures certainly shifted with that transition. Tobias Burg reckons that medieval scholars who signed their handwritings were probably more motivated by the opportunity to have prayers dedicated to them (542), whereas there may be a more economic reasoning in signing works of art from the sixteenth century onwards: in the Middle Ages, the idea of the poeta creator is not yet a common modus operandi. (Cramer 17-21) As more opportunities for the reproduction and selling of scriptures and paintings arose, artists became eager to show what was theirs, and to give their customers a chance of orientating themselves to a growing art market before making a purchase: "the identifiable artistic gesture as a symbolic construction of originality and of signature produces surplus values for the market: it's a signature style" (Römer 353, my translation). For the buyer, a signature by Dürer promised quality; for Dürer himself, the application of the signature was a necessity in order to merchandise his work (Burg 518). The artist's ethos may not have featured as significantly as some sources, among them master forger Eric Hebborn, of all people, would have us believe. Hebborn, however, is certainly right in pointing out that there is no necessity for a picture to feature its creator's signature from a purely aesthetic point of view (59). The point is a different one, as Agamben confirms:

\(^{12}\) "I am the prince of scripters, / Neither my praise nor my fame will ever fade. / Letter, declare who I am."
[If the signature] were missing, the painting would remain completely unchanged in its materiality and quality. Yet the relation introduced by the signature is so important in our culture (in others, this may not be the case, and the painting could live in total anonymity) that the reading of the cartouche radically modifies how we look at the painting in question. Furthermore, if the artwork is one which falls within the era of authorial copyright, the signature has legal effects. (40)

Accordingly, at the dawn of the modern era, signatures increasingly "signpost ambition" (Rubin 564) and act as a medium of heaping praise – the underlying gesture shifts from the humble *N.N. me fecit* (which emphasizes the process) to the more ambitious formula, *OPUS N.N.* (Burg 260), thus from "humble association" to "proud affirmation" (Rubin 567).

At the same time, the strategies used in placing a signature within the painting itself become far more elaborate. The younger Renaissance painters even reject showy signatures as potential disruptions of the mimetic illusion, as Karin Gludovatz shows in her detailed analysis of Titian's *Rape of Lucretia* (1571), where the "TITIANVS F" is placed discreetly in Lucretia's shoe (2011: 27-76). Such examples will later spark Derrida's interest in signatures as an in-between phenomenon,

both identification mark, trace, seal, passage, transitory phenomenon, reality fragment and pictorial illusion at the same time. It can 'disrupt' the structure, 'collapse' into the depicted world and install a protagonist into the pictorial narrative; it can also constitute the work itself and name its author. (Gludovatz 2011: 25, my translation)

The degree of virtuosity with which signatures are applied grows ever more refined, and there are a number of detailed studies dedicated to the respective artists and paintings which cannot be covered in detail here (cf. Rubin, Gludovatz 2006 and 2011). Tobias Burg offers a taxonomy of signatures based on the degree to which they can be considered part of the depicted world (321-8). Burg distinguishes between signatures located outside of the actual painting (on the frame), floating signatures which are not properly integrated into the painting, mildly illusionistic signatures, which are added to objects in the portrayed world (with these objects representing potential media of writing), illusionistic signatures which are clearly integrated into the portrayed scenario, i.e. they adapt to the spatial logic of the painting, and hidden signatures which are integrated to such a degree that the viewer is unlikely to identify them as signatures anymore. The name
of the artist might, for example, be part of the address written on an envelope, it might take the form of an illustration (like Capriolo, who added a roe buck – the literal meaning of his name – to the painting; cf. Gandelman 84f.).

For a diachronic assessment of signatures, Burg's categories are entirely appropriate, as they point out some key developments. Evidently, as signatures become more and more integrated into the depicted world and the applied techniques gain in virtuosity, one recognizes a growing self-confidence on behalf of the painters who gain in visibility. However, from a theoretical point of view, the taxonomy is problematic to some extent. As the discussion of the Derridean signature modes will show, the dichotomy between inside/outside the painting does not really hold up, which means that the notion of classifying signatures as d'abord (when they are located on the frame, for example) has come under scrutiny in poststructural criticism. On the one hand, the status of the signature as writing disconnects it from the pictorial arrangement (Gludovatz 2005: 313), on the other hand, if the signature inevitably carries a trace of the scripteur in the Derridean sense, this means that the locus of the signature ultimately directs us back to the painting. Gludovatz offers a number of insightful discussions of examples which will prove hard to fit into just one of Burg's categories. The signature applied by Caravaggio in The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (1608) appears to be drawn in the dead man's blood (fig. 1-2), so that the painter "makes the audience believe that he dipped his finger into the Baptist's wound and then set down the gruesome scenery" (2011: 96f., my translation).

13 John Wilmerding points to further examples of such hidden signatures which require detailed background knowledge (and, often, a degree of imagination plus a knack for wordplay), such as William Sidney Mount's Catching Rabbits (1839). Here, according to Wilmerding, the chain of association goes rabbit–hare–hair–wig–whig, so that the viewer might arrive at the conclusion that Mount distances himself from the political Whig movement (Haus 163). An additional category which Burg does not classify as a type of signature might be added: the use of a self-portrayal can also serve as a form of immortalization. Burg argues that this form is too ambiguous to count as a signature (387). A related problem will feature in the subsequent discussion of the director's cameo in films.
Thus, the writing presents a puzzle that oscillates between the realms of the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic (109f.), denouncing the painter himself as the assassin (Gludovatz 2005: 322-4). One cannot account for the various fault-lines and tensions visible in Caravaggio's work if one sticks to the traditional separation between inside and outside. Thus, the signature can have the effect of a catalyst which opens the production process and the work itself to detailed observation (Gludovatz 2011: 22); and it represents a "sensitive transitional zone, the quality of which can move from one extreme (transparency) to another one (opacity) just through very few manipulations" (Gludovatz 2005: 317, my translation). In other words, the transitional zone between inside and outside becomes vulnerable to disruptions, and this state of affairs comes from a growing tendency towards a merging of the paratextual signature phenomenon with the work itself. Consequently, as the artist's growing self-confidence drives him to deliver his personal take on an established technique, and also reveals a wish to write himself into the picture (Zenck 34f.), the signature develops into a privileged space of the painter to belong to his own creation (Gludovatz 2006: 69, Burg 391).

The romanticized notion of the individual and the *Sturm & Drang* idea of genius add another major ideological foundation to this aspect of signature discourse. It is down to the emphatic gestures adapted by artists of that period and their exhibition of self-reliance that philosophical and aesthetic ideals completely overshadow the legal motivations (such as copyright claims). The result is "the invention of an anthropologically founded and socially situated individual that acts of his own accord and, ideally, in accordance with others" (Knaller 26, my translation). What
contemporary artists have to offer is certainly not radically new in this respect, though they have constantly sought to reinvent an age-old paradigm by way of technical innovation. In recent years, they have experimented with ephemeral signatures like skywriting, where airplanes leave fleeting, smoke-written messages in the sky, thereby challenging the Derridean notion of iterable writing by presenting the viewer with a message unlikely to survive its scripteur (Gilbert 42).

The contemporary age has seen artists admitting more openly than ever that the signature is but a means of advertising and a concession to the demands of a commercialized art market (Burg 527). In this respect, an ideal signature has to bear the qualities of a logo – a similar case could, incidentally, be made for the signatures of some authors, such as Zadie Smith’s (cf. Schwanebeck [forthcoming]). Even those artists who refuse to sign their works have a signature effect in mind when they do so; a dealer working for conceptual artist and painter Jack Goldstein once remarked: "He wanted it to be a Jack Goldstein work, and signing it didn’t do anything toward making it a Jack Goldstein painting" (qtd. in Haus 165).

The fact that artists make concessions to the principles of supply and demand is certainly not a phenomenon exclusive to the contemporary age, though more and more big sales and exhibitions do not offer art but "a lifestyle that embraces gala nights, cachet, prestige, spectacle and glamour, in which the financial and credit schemes on offer by firms like Sotheby's help to spread opportunity, just as such schemes do in the real estate market, and prices are kept up" (Pearce 237). Picasso, for one, must have known about the dangers of inflation: during a visit to a restaurant in Antibes, he allegedly presented his host with a little drawing in order to settle the bill, "saying: 'How about I give you that?' The restaurateur replied, 'How wonderful! But maître, do you mind signing it?' Picasso answered, 'I'm buying the meal, not the restaurant'" (Haus 162). The buyers seem willing to go along with such practices – after all, as Peter Carey remarks in Theft, "how can you know how much to pay when you have no bloody idea of what it's worth" (41).

Furthermore, it is not just the commercialization of the art market but also the omnipresence of forgeries which occasionally causes critics and art lovers to become nostalgic in unison, as they repeatedly remind us that the contemporary age is one brimming with the inauthentic (Bolz 408-10). Nothing could be further from the truth, as art history demonstrates: Rembrandt himself signed dozens of paintings done by his pupils so as to sell them at better prices (Hebborn 174f., Burg 532); Eric Hebborn points out that several grand painters began their careers copying old masters (173f.).
Paradoxically, the laws of the market often dictate that, for example, the paintings in which Turner copied a largely forgotten Dutch colleague are worth more today than the latter's original works (Hebborn 140f.). In spite of such contradictions, the aura of the original remains intact, and museums continue to prosper on a grand-scale confidence game, "a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds" (Crew and Sims qtd. in McAleer Balkun 10). Even the few prominent forgers who managed to live well on their own fame (e.g. Elmyr de Hory, whose prominence increased significantly following the release of Clifford Irving's biography, the scandal surrounding Irving himself, and de Hory's appearance in Orson Welles's *F for Fake*) were the first to admit that a talent at faking signatures comes in handy in order to convince the experts, who are, according to Peter Carey, "the ones who decided what was art and what was not. They were in charge of history" (*Theft* 33). The experts' reputations remain untarnished, in spite of some minor embarrassments like the infamous archaeologist's, who identified a vessel as Roman on the basis of its initials (*MJDD*), which he claimed stood for *Magno Jovi Deorum Deo* ("to the great Jupiter, God of all Gods"). Eventually, it turned out that he had merely found a glass of *Moutarde Jaune de Dijon* – yellow mustard from Dijon (Hebborn 65).

All major studies of art forgeries dedicate some paragraphs to the importance of signatures, and Hebborn even includes some ad hoc instructions on how they can be imitated (61-4). There can be no doubt that the art market highlights the sheer unlimited power invested in signatures, and that forgers – those "modern-day alchemists" (Mihm 374) – are brilliant at exploiting this arrangement:

The appeal of signature forgery lies in the ease with which a minor work of the right period can be boosted to a much higher market value. An early drawing by Pieter Breughel, "Big Fishes eat Little Ones" was converted into an Hieronymus Bosch creation in 1557, only to regain correct authorship when Breughel's skills gained a world-wide recognition. In more recent times it is claimed that Modigliani liberally signed several of his friends' works so that they could share the financial benefits that accrued from his rise to fame, after years of poverty in Paris. (Fleming 15)

In spite of the incontestable craftsmanship shown by de Hory, Hebborn and some of their better-known colleagues (like Edgar Mrugalla or Konrad Kujau), there are very few forgers whose works continued to sell for exorbi-
tant prices following their exposure. In their testimonies, art historians tend to forget that it is only on the basis of forgeries that authenticity can be established in the first place (Pritchard 341; Bolz 415). One of the few to sing the praises of forgers was John Quincy Adams, who claimed that they even showed "superior skill and superior modesty. It requires more talent to sign another man's name than one's own and the counterfeiter does at least his work in the dark" (qtd. in Mihm 9).

Evidently, the art market prefers to let sleeping dogs lie. Though some attempts have recently been made to speak more favorably of copies and forgeries (Imesch 140; von Gehlen 61-100), the inauthentic remains the original's ugly cousin whose existence no-one wants to admit, although the counterfeit is, at the same time, the indispensable "standard by which authenticity is determined" (McAleer Balkun 17). It is this logic of supplementarity which requires a decidedly Derridean perspective to be added to the signature discussion.

The Logic of Repetition

A Derridean Perspective

In John Updike's short story, "Three Illuminations in the Life of an American Writer" (1982), aging novelist Henry Bech takes on the monumental task of signing 28,500 copies of a book in two weeks. Initially flattered by the proposal, Bech soon sickens at the prospect of repeating his signature over and over again. Signing for hours without cease, he nearly despairs at the monotony of the activity, starting to doubt his own writing, before being haunted by nightmarish visions of his own signature threatening him from the page, combined with fits of manual impotence: his muscles ache, and his spelling deteriorates. For the climax, Updike throws in a sophisticated twist on the notion of writer's block: Bech questions his own identity and the arbitrary relationship between the signifiers on the page and his personality: "Who was this Henry Bech?" (25). Eventually, he surrenders in the face of what is supposed to be the easiest of all writing assignments: "All was

Ironically, it is the forger's ambition to sign his own work which often leads to his exposure (Fleming 14; Gorris and Röbel 134).

In a text dating from 1978, when he was on a book tour, German author Martin Walser articulates a similar feeling as he reflects on the many books he has signed: "As a cynical traveler, I might be inclined to say: signing is more important than discussing. But it is not true. Of all the activities done with my right hand, signing will remain the strangest one to me" (Walser 600, my translation).
poised, and the expectant blankness of the paper seemed an utter bliss to
the author, as he gazed deep into the negative perfection to which his
career had been brought. He could not even write his own name" (27).
Before this tragicomic epitaph to his career, Bech has already lived through
another major disappointment: seeking solace and encouragement during a
crisis, the aging writer calls on a man who has regularly asked him for
signed copies of all his new works. To Bech’s dismay, however, it turns out
that the man whom he has taken for his most devoted fan has never read a
single line of Bech’s prose, instead just stacking signed copies as an
investment, "along with – oh, treachery! – similarly exhaustive, tightly
packed, and beautifully unread collections of Roth, Mailer, Barth, Capote"
(10).

The mishaps of Updike’s alter ego were mirrored by media reports in
2011 when novelist John Green promised to personally sign every pre-
ordered copy of his new novel, The Fault in Our Stars (ultimately amounting
to a staggering 150,000 copies, cf. Trachtenberg) – the nightmarish scenario
could have been dreamt up by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. If there
are two main aspects to a person’s identity – unmistakable individuality and
stability over time, or what Paul Ricoeur designates as ipse and idem (77) –
then it seems as though signatures had been handed the ungrateful task of
negotiating between the two, of signalling uniqueness on the one hand yet
establishing patterns on the other. It is the bridge between uniqueness and
recognizability which is of major interest for deconstructivists. With a
Derridean framework, signatures can be read as the paradigmatic example,
not only for the logic of the supplement, "in which the marginal becomes
central by virtue of its very marginality" (Culler 1989: 196), but for the
mechanisms at work in what is called différance (the idea of infinite deferral),
as well as for "pure writing beyond every concept" (Agamben 78).

Few philosophers have given as much room to the signature
phenomenon as Derrida (most notably in his essay "Signature Event
Context" and in a lesser-known little book called Signéponge), whose name
is inextricably linked to the movement that became known as post-
structuralism. However, to call Derrida’s approach a systematic guide to the
topic would hardly do him justice: for one thing, because post-structuralism
does not deliver readily applicable solutions and methods, and also because
signatures were never the ultimate aim of Derrida’s investigations, but rather
figured as a paradigmatic example. However, what he demonstrates in
various texts is not only that language is the legitimate locus of signatures,
but also that their performative quality as near-magical speech acts shows remnants of the "archaic signatory nature of language" in general (Agamben 76).

The deconstructivist position lies at the periphery (les marges) of thought, i.e. of traditional logocentric philosophy. In what may be deemed his academic breakthrough, Of Grammatology (1967), Derrida emphasises the singular position of writing as an unstoppable machinery determined by the notion of différance (a fusion of differencier and différer whose idiosyncratic spelling can only be grasped in writing), i.e. the fact that it is the irreducible absence of intention or assistance "from the most 'event-like' statement possible" that authorizes the speaker (Derrida 1991: 105). For Derrida, writing is essentially about communication in absentia, which logically evokes the "representative character" of all written signs (1991: 87). This involves a large degree of arbitrariness, the immense value of signatures as "the most writerly of all writing" notwithstanding (Keskinen 295). The graphematic mark, according to Derrida, generally implies "the possibility of functioning without the full and actual presence of the intentional act (that of the conscious ego fully present to itself, to what it says, and to the other)" (1993: 58), i.e. it is about absence per se: "the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer" (1991: 107). As a consequence, writing is bound to outlive the signer, as is illustrated in a brief exchange from Joe Orton's Loot (1965), a darkly comic classic of British post-war drama in which bank-robbers mingle with black widows:

FAY. My references were signed by people of repute.
MCLEVY. You murdered most of them.
FAY. That doesn't invalidate their signatures.
(Loot 256)

Moreover, Derrida draws upon the signature example to demonstrate that cultural utterances are performative acts, for the signature "in a certain way produces its own subject" and "gives the person the right to do what he is doing. [...] When there is such a gesture, an enunciation, it speaks of indetermination but produces determination. It is by the gift that the Law is produced." (1987: 200) In order to put the performative aspect into practice, the act of signing has to be "grounded in repetition" (Neef 228), as Updike's Henry Bech learns the hard way when his signature begins to look less and less convincing with every repetition. Stuck between performative demands and the condition of iterability, the signature can never be perfect, since the gap between "the absolute singularity of an event" and recognizability will
always remain too large (Derrida 1991: 107). In his essay on Nietzsche, Derrida even goes so far as to say that the legitimization of the signature act is an outright fiction and borders on hypocrisy (2000: 13).

Let me stress that the historical approach to signatures in the arts sketched before is by no means totally different in nature from what Derrida examines. On the contrary, he gives room to the topic of painting, too, though he is more invested with the exact locus of the signature than with historical developments. In his reflections on the Parergon, Derrida argues that the work of art must always be surrounded by a frame, though this frame is hardly "a determinable entity whose qualities could be isolated" (Culler 1989: 197). Signatures share some characteristics with the frame insofar as they, in theory,

lie outside the work, to frame it, present it, authorize it, but it seems that truly to frame, to mark, or to sign a work the signature must lie within, at its very heart. A problematical relation between inside and outside is played out in the inscription of proper names and their attempt to frame from the inside. The problem of the frame – of the distinction between inside and outside and of the structure of the border – is decisive for aesthetics in general. (Culler 1989: 192f.)

Gludovatz illustrates this on several occasions in her complex analysis of the history of artistic signatures – it is not just the example of Caravaggio where the signature breaks out of the depicted world to fold in on the scenery (2011: 76), and thus inevitably informs our interpretation – this problem lies at the heart of Derrida’s Signéponge. I have outlined the Signéponge experiment (a playful reading of the works of French Poet Francis Ponge) in another context and have linked its implications to the field of narratology elsewhere, yet some of the basic mechanisms which Derrida describes must be summarized here, too.

With Signéponge, Derrida comes remarkably close to developing a kind of taxonomy of signature metaphors (which allows for the paradoxical case that it is a deconstructivist who provides the most comprehensive classification), though be it just for the purpose of deconstructing the very foundations of the signature system itself. Derrida traces the point where signatures transcend from a literal phenomenon into metaphor, as the concept of style, too, "is based on a signature-feeling that saturates the text it authenticates yet is not actually there as a proper noun, as 'Genet' or

17 For a more detailed sketch of Signéponge with a detailed interpretation of Zadie Smith’s novel, The Autograph Man, see Schwanebeck [forthcoming], or Christian Keathley’s take on the Allen Smithee case. My subsequent summary of Signéponge in this chapter here will draw upon the more detailed account in my interpretation of Smith’s novel.
'Rembrandt'” (Hartman 16). Derrida shows to what extent we are slaves to metaphor in applying the notion of signature style, as it were, much more than we would like to admit. In his reading of the poems of Francis Ponge, Derrida shows that the literal act of writing immediately gives way to mythical elevation by way of "a banal and confused metaphor" (1984: 54), for the status of an artistic signature style as an inimitable idiom is hardly justified – it would contradict the very foundations of iterability which demand that the signature can be "repeated in principle again and again in all sorts of contexts [...] at the same time as being in some way singular every time" (Royle 120).

With the third signature mode introduced in Signéponge, Derrida links the discussion back to the position he had previously laid down in The Truth in Painting (1978), locating the signature at the "fold of the placement [le pli de la mise] in abyss" [sic!] (1984: 54), demonstrating in a little experiment that the Ponge signature folds back into the text, acting as a kind of "embedding of the writer's name" (Keathley 124) over any interpretation of Ponge's work, for "Sponge sponges [Eponge éponge], the sponge expunges, the sponge is Ponge: for example a writing or a signature – it can also efface the traces of chalk on a blackboard, a table, or a slate" (Derrida 1984: 72). By proving that the name itself can serve as a legitimate key to deciphering the text, Derrida is certainly not interested in pursuing a romantic vision of the artist or of falling prey to the notion of magical names that Wittgenstein reflects on. In fact, Derrida pokes fun at the somewhat arbitrary modes of interpretation which are under the spell of the alchemy of names and lead to monumentalizations (Derrida 1998a: 369f.); using the aleatoric approach of locating the (S)Ponge metaphor in Ponge’s writing actually yields results where they are "least expected" (Keathley 126). The signature once again transgresses the boundaries between inside/outside and manages "to contract with Francis Ponge the absolute idiom of a contract: one single countersigned signature, one single thing signing double" (Derrida 1984: 48).

What Derrida's experiment proves beyond refute is that, with the need of recognizing and legitimizing signatures, responsibility shifts from the addresser to the addressee, who is willing to commit to the act of recognition: "There is no signature without countersignature" (Wetzel 53). Therefore, the most straightforward function which the signature carries may be on behalf of the signer, i.e. to signal finality and completion (Derrida 1998a: 372; cf. Gludovatz 2011: 9), but at the same time, it opens the work of art for the act of interpretation and for ambiguity. Thus, Signéponge confirms Wittgenstein's claim that the feeling of reverence linked to the
Alchemy of names does not really "tell us anything about the name or its bearer. It is a pathological statement about the speaker. – One doesn't teach a child that this name fits the bearer" (Wittgenstein 1998: § 73). Agamben talks about the same phenomenon when he states that it is in the signature where "the gesture of reading and that of writing invert their relation and enter into a zone of undecidability. Here reading becomes writing, and writing is wholly resolved into reading" (56).

Our partaking in the conventional act stabilizes its binding power. Each new affirmation of the original wears out the convention, yet paradoxically affirms the bond at the same time. In this respect, it shares some characteristics with the authentic, for with each new definition of it, "we enter into a cycle of reaffirmations of the 'one', only now in a chain of substitutions and supplements." (Wetzel 50) Thus, like Foucault before him, Derrida seeks to rectify the "fallacious idea that there are, as it were, pure and unmarked signs, that the signans neutrally signifies the signatum, univocally and once and for all" (Agamben 64). For what looks like a pure sign, in fact, turns out to be one of the transcendental signifiers whose legitimacy Derrida questioned time and again. The idea of the archi-signature always already represents "supplement with respect to every concept and every presence" (ibid. 78f.). In order to illustrate this problematic state of affairs, I will offer a brief discussion of the practices at work in the autograph business.

**Autograph Politics**

Not all writers are such sad cases as Updike's Henry Bech. Some have tried to help themselves using mechanical devices to effectively produce elaborate forms of secretarials;¹⁸ a luckier (fictitious) example is presented in Graham Greene's *The Third Man*, the novelization of his well-known screenplay for the 1949 *film noir* directed by Carol Reed. The protagonist, author Rollo Martins,¹⁹ successfully passes for a successful writer of highbrow fiction, just because his pseudonym as a pulp fiction writer (Dexter) happens to be the other man's name. The mix-up leads to Martins being invited to partake in a discussion in the other man's name and to sign his books:

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¹⁸ Cf. the case of Margaret Atwood, who created a long-distance device called the Longpen that would allow her to host book signings from her home, as the signature applied to her tablet PC would be executed by a robot arm in Canadian bookstores.

¹⁹ Greene changed the name from the script's *Holly* Martins.
"B. Dexter, B. Dexter, B. Dexter," Martins wrote rapidly – it was not, after all, a lie. One by one the books were collected by their owners; little half-sentences of delight and compliment were dropped like curtsies – was this what it was to be a writer? (Third Man 78)

As a writer seldom asked for his autograph, Martins enjoys his brief stint at stardom and happily fulfills all requests for his autograph; the readers blissfully unaware of the mix-up. It is a fitting tableau for the autograph business in general, where so much depends on trust and a certain level of make-believe.

Autographs constitute an interesting patch within the field of signatures, and they are worth elaborating on in some detail, as the study of the autograph market reveals, on a micro-level, a number of characteristics which can also be detected in the signature debate at large. A brief look into the autograph business is sufficient to show that we find the peculiar logic of the signature convention taken to an extreme here. More to the point: in the autograph market, the regular mechanisms of the signature exchange are translated into currency, as the signer finds himself subjugated to an outright measuring of his worth. This yields consequences that are both absurd and hilarious, as becomes evident in many stories circulating in the milieu of autograph hunters. German comedian Dieter Nuhr, to name but one example, recounts meeting some fans, one of whom asked him for no less than ten signed photographs in addition to several signed copies of his books: "When he was done, at last, and I turned to the other people who had been waiting, I could hear him ask his neighbor, 'By the way: who is that guy?'") (Nuhr qtd. in Krevert and Krammeier 163) Because they have an exceptionally bad reputation for being ruthless in their hunt for signatures and of exhibiting a moral code as dubious as that of paparazzi photographers, it is safe to say that autograph hunters are occasionally frowned upon. One need not go as far as comedian Ricky Gervais, who dubbed autograph hunters "the epsilon minors of society" in his live show, Science (2010), and added that "even trainspotters look down on autograph hunters," but the reputation certainly prevails.

British novelist Zadie Smith dedicated a whole novel (The Autograph Man, 2002) to that very distinguished milieu of collectors, exposing some of the fundamental contradictions in the process, not least the attempts of autograph collectors to refute Walter Benjamin’s famous claim in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935) that "[the aura] has no replica" (19). Benjamin argues that the work of art does not have the same qualities in the modern age, and that "what shrinks in an age where the work
of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura" (7), most prominently so in films. Every recipient wants to get hold of the work of art, at least by partaking in the artist's fame, which makes for a highly asymmetrical relationship between star and fan which is reflected in the practice of autograph fairs, where fans queue for hours in order to obtain a signature.\textsuperscript{20} Benjamin claims that the cinematic apparatus has demolished the aura and produced a kind of perception – Benjamin talks about a distinct signature quality \textit{[Signatur einer Wahrnehmung]} in German – "where 'a sense of similarity in the world' is so highly developed that, through reproduction, it even mines similarity from what only happens once" (10). This paragraph is quite telling, not only because of Benjamin's mourning for the disappearance of the sublime auratic experience of the pre-cinematic age, but also because from this follows that the Derridean \textit{différance} is the only way of recognising aura within a repetitive pattern – a fitting though bitter punchline to John Updike's story, as it were.

Smith's novel (which occasionally quotes Benjamin's very own thoughts and formulations) pokes fun at the way autograph collectors buy into the illusion of getting hold of a person's (or a historical moment's) uniqueness via acquiring dated signatures, and of "partak[ing] (in however minor a way) of the famousness of these people and their remarkable ability to cheat Death of its satisfaction: obscurity" (153). One could argue, of course, that autographs differ from the work of art insofar as they have no value in themselves, which is also the first lesson given to Smith's protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem: "the money is, you see, in the content" (27). However, if the analysis of the role of signatures in the art-market shows one thing, it is that the belief in an intrinsic value of paintings, no matter what its creator's degree of fame, is but an illusion. Otherwise, there would be no accounting for the immense decrease in value which usually follows from the revelation that a canonical piece is, in fact, a forgery. Like in the case of paintings, the value of an autograph is not assessed on the basis of its aesthetic quality but via its historical dimension: it does not matter that Alex' colleague cannot tell a famous actress from "the Arizona baby murderer" (180), just as long as he is aware that someone for whom her autograph signifies is willing to pay for it, and the same goes for all "Olympians, Inventors, TV Personalities, Weathermen, Nobel Prize Winners, Writers, Leipdopterists, Entomologists, Movie Actors, Scientists, Assassins and the Assassinated" (25). Consequently – like the art-market – the autograph market as portrayed in Smith's book is brimming with forgeries. The irony

\textsuperscript{20} In an interview, \textit{Lord of the Rings} actor Sean Astin stated that, in order to lighten the mood, he asks people for \textit{their} autograph when they ask him to sign something ("Pint of Milk").
lies in the forgery's being considered authentic because it looks perfect, whereas Updike’s protagonist witnesses the deterioration of his signature towards a degré zéro of meaning as he repeats it, so that the only examples of his writing which remain productive in the sense of différance (i.e. those which, to him, are flawed or faulty) are considered worthless within the framework of his task. The whole process is taken to the absurd in The Autograph Man when the protagonist Alex convinces Kitty Alexander, a former screen idol modelled on Greta Garbo,\(^{21}\) to exploit the hoax around her alleged death (i.e. the realization of the Derridean absence), and to cash in on the increased value of her signature. The monetary value of her autograph rises with the degree of confusion involved, rendering her signature a testimony to the oddities and inconsistency of the capitalist approach to signatures:

> Even when they find out you're not [dead] then it'll just be worth more because you'll be the actress who everybody thought was dead and her autograph went for such and such on the day that everybody thought she was dead – and on and on. That's the way it works. It's all madness anyway. Take it, Kitty. Take it and bloody run. (329f.)

With the laws of the market driving the autograph hunt, the question of authenticity becomes a problematic issue as many autograph dealers offer guarantees on their items, which contradicts both the idea of authenticity in itself and Derrida’s insistence on absence, for how can one verify the authenticity of something without its initiator being present, not to mention the complications involved in establishing the authenticity of ancient documents? These autographs may still exude authenticity in the sense of power (based on the fan-communicator who authorizes the autograph by believing in it); yet authenticity in the sense of "my own hand" can never be verified. Obviously, there must be more to autographs as communicators of absence, and in order to grasp this additional dimension, Benjamin’s concept of aura needs to be added to the discussion.

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\(^{21}\) Both Kitty Alexander and Garbo (to whom Zadie Smith also dedicated an essay) withdrew from the public, and both signed few autographs: "Kitty Alexander signed even less than Garbo. Kitty was awkward and invisible as Jehovah. She was aloof. The public hated her for it. And in time she was forgotten, for the public do not like to be ignored" (Autograph Man 56). Garbo's Swedish origins are hinted at in the book when an alleged Kitty Alexander autograph is offered by a "notorious Swedish crook" (208). In addition to Garbo, Norma Desmond, the infamous (and fictitious) diva from Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard (1950), provides a major intertextual reference point. Kitty's relationship with her manager is clearly modelled on this film.
Autographs expand Benjamin’s idea of the productive machinery to the aural quality of the famous person. An autograph’s value depends on the number of reproductions which are in circulation. In The Autograph Man, the reader is informed that a Ginger Rogers autograph is not worth a lot because Rogers "signed everything she could get her hands on," which, in the twisted logic of the autograph market, accounts for the actress’s reputation as "common, in the purest meaning of that word" (56). In other words: though Rogers may at one point have embodied the ideal of what Benjamin termed a Starkultus [cult of stardom] persona, but the amount of signatures she granted her fans meant that she contributed to the demolition of her own aura. To use Benjamin’s diction, she stripped "the object of its sheath, shattering the aura" (2008: 10). In the process, the actors are objectified, as this is the necessary requirement for equating them with their signatures in metonymical fashion, thus Alex-Li finds his bag filled with "Elizabeth Taylors and Veronica Lakes, Gene Tierneys and James Masons, Rosemary Clooneys and Jules Munshins, back to back, separated by sheaths of plastic" (Autograph Man 51).

Even if it is true that a signature can never fully make up for lost aura, the signed first editions in John Updike’s story, for example, certainly regain "some of the lost unique touch of the artist" as opposed to a purely mechanical copy (Keskinen 290). In a capitalist cost-benefit environment, autographs are always subject to fraud and deception: Baudrillard describes mechanical (over)production as a vicious circle which seeks to compensate for the loss of the real that arises in the process. Nostalgia (i.e. the inability to overcome the past) then makes for "a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of secondhand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (1993: 347).

When Smith’s protagonist believes to possess the aura ("He had it in a bottle. He possessed it. It was part of him, almost," 289), he falls prey to an illusion, of course. In Benjamin’s diction, it is not the aura but merely the trace (Spur) which can be controlled, whereas the aura controls us, not vice versa: "In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us" (Benjamin 1999: 447).
The *Auteur's Mighty Signature*: Alfred Hitchcock

When it comes to assessing the role signatures play in fiction, some of the key semanticizations were already mentioned: one is the romantic notion evoked by the lovers in Shakespeare and Roth, another one is the imposturous adaptation of forgeries which toys with the fear of forgery. It is down to genres such as the detective novel to frequently remind us of the signature's role as a signifier of authenticity, and of other, more subversive examples, to shatter this aura. Before interrogating the extended notion of signature as a metaphor of style and directorial vision, it is worth contemplating the role which signatures typically play in movie plots. In many respects, signatures are ideal plot vehicles: they exert an air of obscurity and mundane detail that is likely to keep the viewer hooked, but at the same time, they are sufficiently vague to act as empty signifiers like the ubiquitous MacGuffins used in the Hitchcockian and post-Hitchcockian spy film to be examined later on: this is the domain of military blueprints (*The 39 Steps*) and of the obscure microfilms that the James Bond films of the Cold War era were to become so infatuated with. In a number of examples (like Pedro Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999), autographs – acting as authentic reminders of the past – trigger the inciting incident of the plot; in other cases, they even provide comic relief, as in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, 1989), where the protagonist runs into Adolf Hitler during a party rally in Berlin and it seems like the game might be up – but the dictator merely gives him an autograph and walks on. In the case of Spielberg's *The Terminal* (2004), it is eventually revealed that hapless exile Victor Navorsky (Tom Hanks) who, following a revolution in his (fictional) home country, is forced to spend a year inside John F. Kennedy International Airport, has come to America in order obtain an autograph. Navorsky is on a mission to fulfill his father’s dying wish: to collect the only signature missing in his collection of Jazz musicians’ autographs. Moreover, as *The Terminal*s reception in the USA demonstrated, the film's investigation of signatures does not end with the plot gimmick.

One could extend this discussion to the film’s interrogation of the performative qualities of signs and gestures, but I will limit myself to one example here: The film's closing credits reproduce the personal signature of the production team’s key players (fig. 3), an ironic statement not dissimilar from the quality which Rembert Hüser attributes to the Saul Bass-designed

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22 This theme can be detected in the transformation Victor undergoes, moving from total incapability to express himself in English towards mastery of the foreign tongue, adapting signs and gestures, turning into a symbol ("The Goat") himself in the process.
credits for Martin Scorsese's films: to remind us that "[i]n the movies we are confronted with an author, who cannot even write his own name" (Hüser 168). The design of the credits in *The Terminal* playfully acknowledges a simple truth that is marginalized in *auteur* discourse: that films are collective products, bearing the handwritings of screenwriters, producers, actors, and technicians, not just the director's signature.

![Fig. 3: Signatures in the closing credits of *The Terminal* (2004)](image)

Ironically, the film's reception demonstrated that the joke was lost on its audience, for *The Terminal* opened to mixed reviews, with many critics bemoaning the lack of typical Spielberg qualities: although Victor moves through the diegetic world like the prototypical Spielbergian (man-)child, all wondrous eyes and childish curiosity, the picaresque tone of the film seemed too much of a departure from the director's usual style. This example demonstrates that films, as products of popular culture viewed by millions, may hint at a higher degree of complexity than the theoretical investigation of the signature phenomenon and the power invested in them may suggest. The MacGuffin-like use of signatures as a plot device are but one aspect regarding the cinematic dimension of signatures, but a symptomatic one regarding the oscillation between empty signification and discursive impact. This will be illustrated via a discussion of *auteurism* using the example of Alfred Hitchcock, a director whose alleged signature style is even more renowned than that of Spielberg – no wonder that the episode of MTV's *Celebrity Deathmatch* which pitted the two directors and their
signature styles against each other in animated form saw a clear winner in Hitchcock.\textsuperscript{23}

Signature in Films: The \textit{Auteur}'s Ultimate MacGuffin

This being a cursory essay investigating the \textit{auteur} phenomenon as one paradigm amongst many, it is not my aim to narrate the precise history of \textit{auteurism}.\textsuperscript{24} However, it is necessary to draw attention to several details surrounding the concept's origins, for its proponents drew upon the metaphors of signature and writing from the beginning. The reasons for this may very well be found in a feeling of having to legitimize film. Film had, up to the early 1970s, not been properly considered and theorized in the academic field, not least because of the position put forward by critics of the Frankfurt School who denied the possibility of subjectivity in the cinematic apparatus (Steinlein 361). When the young journalists working for the \textit{Cahiers du Cinéma} sought a chance to interview American directors in order to learn about their preferred techniques, it still seemed absurd to many scholars to grant films the status of art-works and to regard their creators with the same respect as painters or authors. Consequently, some of the very first attempts to offer an aesthetic vindication of film borrow metaphors related to more established artistic branch, the most well-known example being Alexandre Astruc's influential essay, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: \textit{La Caméra-Stylo}" (1948), in which Astruc argues that the artistic emancipation of the cinema will see the film-maker find a form by which he can "translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel" (159). It is no coincidence that Astruc chooses the metaphor of writing when he announces the age of \textit{caméra-stylo}: "Direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The film-maker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen" (161).

The idea of the \textit{auteur}, which gained momentum in the 1960s, advertised the idea that a director should be seen as a film's creative consciousness. The theoretical schools surrounding André Bazin in France and Andrew Sarris in the United States developed this idea and defied

\textsuperscript{23} Following an opening in which Hitchcock presents the storyboards of his planned attack on Spielberg, his initial knife attacks fail to hurt the director of \textit{Jaws} (1975), as these – in \textit{Psycho} fashion – leave too much to the imagination and cannot physically hurt Spielberg. However, Hitchcock manages to mutilate his opponent, who is eventually ripped apart by the ghosts from \textit{Raiders of the Lost Ark} (1981) whom he has cheated out of licensing fees.

\textsuperscript{24} A concise overview of the concept's development is given by Robin Wood (1-20).
expectations when they claimed that the ideal incarnations of the *auteur* principle were neither to be sought in the European expressionist movement nor in Soviet film of the 1920s, but, paradoxically, in the culture industry of Hollywood (the American studio system), with Sarris arguing that the pressures of commissioned work meant that directors like John Ford were forced to express their personalities through a distinct visual style, not through the content matter of their films (586f.). Similarly, the *Cahiers* line of reasoning suggested that in spite of industrial pressure, of censorship on behalf of the Hays office, or of the necessity to satisfy general taste and to turn out profitable films, directors like Howard Hawks were defined by their ability to articulate "a thought or a philosophy [...] peculiar to each author and recurrent in his oeuvre" (Steinlein 364) and "to embed within [their] films [their] own stylistic signature despite the pressures of the studio system" (Braddock and Hock 12).

The link to the signature metaphor is provided by Sarris himself, who defines the *auteurial* style as "the distinguishable personality of the director" over a group of films, in which he must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (586). In subsequent studies of the key *auteurs* referred to in these early publications – a list that would include Josef von Sternberg, Max Ophüls, Fritz Lang, Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, amongst others –, the signature metaphor was to remain influential, as the list of stylistic devices typically associated with *auteur* qualities includes both a so-called signature style and the idea of a signature shot (cf. Crowl 161). The very idea of the latter refers us back to the Derridean conundrum regarding questions of originality, which is often invoked as a mighty signifier characterizing the aura of the genius, although the degree of originality often remains dubious – one example would be Hitchcock's use of the Dolly Zoom to illustrate Scottie Ferguson's (James Stewart) acrophobia in *Vertigo* (1958). In his conversation with François Truffaut, Hitchcock took credit for having created the technique (246), and it would become widely known as the Hitchcock shot, although he was not the first to use it. On a similar note, Geoffrey Heptonstall offers a discussion of Orson Welles's handling of the soundtrack as an "authorial signature" (298) – Welles being another director whose apotheosis was initiated through interviews of young film students and journalists like Peter Bogdanovich in the 1960s.

Thus, the signature metaphor survives (and thrives) in the most unlikely of circumstances: as part of an ideological project which should have been an anachronism when it came into being (cf. Braddock and Hock 13), at a time when (post-)structuralist critics had announced the death of
the author or, at the least, had attempted to replace him with the concept of the author function (Foucault): an ideological project brought about by the capitalist notion of the autonomous individual. There is a certain degree of irony in the fact that journalists all of a sudden proclaimed that the center of the post-war culture industry so viciously attacked by the Frankfurt School was, in fact, a refuge of creativity where one man (the director) still resembled the autonomous creator-figure whose death had been announced by Barthes – Truffaut published his conversation with Hitchcock the same year in which Barthes wrote "La mort de l’auteur," 1968.25

Although contemporary filmic paratexts (such as the making-of feature frequently included on DVD releases) continue to call upon the trope of the director as an unerring man with a vision who controls the shaping of the film in every department, a younger school of directors who have been trained in film schools and universities is more likely to distance themselves from the stylized notion of the creator genius. To name one example, Anthony Minghella dedicates a telling passage to the signature metaphor when he warns other directors of insisting too much on a unique style and signature shots:

You can’t support very many visual intensifiers in a film. I don’t think you can overburden a film with visual theory. […] There’s a wonderful moment, in a book by Robert Bresson, where a writer is talking to his son and he says, "You don’t need to sign your letters. I recognize your handwriting." The attempt to impose a recognizable visual signature on films is, to me, very unedifying and unattractive. (104)

A degree of demystification may have set in, with even former proponents of auteur theory admitting that the concept amounts "to little more than a trademark, another commodity brand name displayed with pride even though there is no history of quality or distinction behind it" (Keathley 121). However, the question remains how the notion of the auteur, in spite of the controversial discussions surrounding it to this very day, managed to reconcile such differences like "artistic subjectivity and technical objectivity […]", the author as a creator genius in the modern sense of the term, […] and the author as a discreet gaze fixed on the world to reveal its signification and truth" (Steinlein 372). It is certainly no coincidence that both Welles and Hitchcock, the two filmmakers cited time and again as "[living] proof of the success of auteurist theories" (Saper 31), were directors whose reputation and fame were not solely based on the remarkable quality of their work, but

25 See Robin Wood’s discussion of Barthes in the context of auteur theory (8-27).
also on their presence in front of the camera, and the fact that their recognizable images were locked in the public consciousness. The same goes for their public personas: Welles the eccentric cinematic prodigy who had fallen out with the major studios, Hitchcock the recognizable master of suspense who cultivated his love for the macabre.

This study does by no means merely intend to add to the big number of biographical interpretations of Hitchcockian cinema that link the key themes of Psycho (1960) and The Birds (1962) to the director's own alleged obsession with his (blonde) leading ladies, The Wrong Man's (1956) or Vertigo's (1958) interrogation of loss to the director's own incarceration trauma, or Frenzy's (1972) macabre food carnival to the auteur's own insatiable appetite. The emphasis on these topics is, to some degree, understandable – given the fact that Hitchcock planted these seeds himself and insisted on their importance in analyzing his work – yet their importance should not be exaggerated. In order to assess the impact of the Hitchcockian signature, however, it is necessary to briefly focus on Hitchcock's public persona and the signature quality of his cameo appearances.

The Hitchcock Persona and the Cameo as Signature Effect

In his influential essay on auteur theory, Peter Wollen points to two different camps in auteurism – those who focus on thematic motifs, and those whose interest lies with questions of style and mise-en-scène (590). Hitchcock, it would appear, is the perfect paradigm to unite both camps, for even those who remain doubtful about the ideological implications of auteur theory acknowledge his characteristic handling of plot-structures (Wood 239-48). Since Wollen's emphatic claim that "[w]e need not two or three books on Hitchcock and Ford, but many, many more" (601), dozens of monographs and compilations have been published on the subject, and the director's reputation continues to be that of the visionary who took risks and who shaped the grammar of film like no one before or after him. This reputation lives on in biographies, academic publications whose very titles emphasize Hitchcock's unique handwriting (cf. Reuter), and even fictionalized accounts, such as Sacha Gervasi's film Hitchcock (2012), which chronicles the unlikely

26 Autobiographical accounts of Hitchcock frequently invoke the incarceration legend which Truffaut included right at the beginning of his Hitchcock book: the story of how Hitchcock, at the tender age of five, was put behind prison bars for a day by his father in order to teach him a lesson (Truffaut 25).
success-story of *Psycho* and, interestingly, chooses the moment when Hitchcock signs a check to cover for the production costs in order to illustrate his complete independence from studio control. Furthermore, Hitchcock has turned into a profitable franchise, selling exceptionally well in DVD box-sets such as *The Alfred Hitchcock Signature (!) Collection* (2004). Take a random appreciation of the Hitchcockian style and you will see the exact mechanisms of the director’s deification on behalf of his followers. Gary Leva’s documentary *The Master’s Touch: Hitchcock’s Signature Style*, included on the recent BluRay release of *North by Northwest* (1959), is a case in point, for it features several renowned directors associated with the suspense genre (including William Friedkin, Curtis Hanson, and John Carpenter) describing Hitchcock’s impact on their own films and the debt they claim to owe him, taking turns to describe the signature quality of Hitchcock’s work as announced in the title. Their contributions cover everything from stylistic choices (including the use of POV shots, the grammar of imagery, his use of soundtrack and even the restraining of sounds, like in *Dial M for Murder*, 1954), to thematic issues and motifs (including his portrayal of femininity, the recurring motif of the abyss, and the theme of identity loss which writer Steven DeRosa, who is interviewed in the film, identifies as Hitchcock’s "own signature theme").

There is much talk about the "genuine Hitchcock" and the autobiographical dimension of nearly all his films – in spite of the fact that Hitchcock nearly always adapted plays and novels and worked in a bigger variety of genres than he is often credited for, with director Guillermo del Toro sharing his observation that "the root of Alfred Hitchcock" is situated in the films. Hitchcock may arguably present the only case where the auteur brand is not only left completely intact, but where it is even used in advertising efforts that are normally reserved for actors – of the more than 20 signature collections sold by Warner Home Video, only one is dedicated to a director (Hitchcock), the others are all in the names of former movie idols like John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart, or Barbara Stanwyck. This degree of appreciation reflects a view which director Francis Lawrence shares in *The Master’s Touch*: "When you can clearly see somebody’s stamp and imprint on movie after movie after movie, to me, that makes them an auteur because their vision is coming across." At one point, the film even juxtaposes Hitchcock’s image with that of Mozart and draws comparisons between their unique handling of technique and rhythm (fig. 4).

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27 Hitchcock himself repeatedly stressed that he favored cinematic style over content: "I don't care what the film is about. I don't even know who was in that airplane attacking Cary Grant. I don't care. So long as the audience goes through that emotion! Content is quite secondary to me" (Hitchcock 292).
In some cases, the tributes border on the ridiculous and even take the shape of outright tautologies. In the same documentary, DeRosa goes on record claiming that Hitchcock "express[ed] himself […] in this incredibly free and incredibly expressive way" [sic!]. Charles Barr is one of the few scholars to address what is wrong with this uncritical approach, for although the source materials of Hitchcock's films have recently been taken into account properly for the first time in adaptation studies, scholars still deny the existence (and importance) of Hitchcock's collaborators, "pay[ing] lip-service to the need to go beyond auteurism" instead (Barr 33). Consequently, Barr argues that we should be careful to distinguish between the historical person of Hitchcock and 'Hitchcock' in the sense of "a body of work, a distinctive trademarked form of cinema" (11).

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Fig. 4: The auteur in the company of Mozart (The Master's Touch)*

This means that one cannot (and should not) lead a discussion of the authorial signature in films without referring to Hitchcock's remarkable ability to establish a brand in his name which survived him, and which had already gained a life of its own before his death: Stephen Hock declares that "the Hitchcock brand name […] shows no signs of being limited by Alfred Hitchcock's own mortality" (182), and this holds true both for the kind of merchandise that circulates in Hitchcock's name (including radio plays and mystery novels), as well as for his directorial style, a perceived "Hitchcock sensibility [which] lingers on" (Orr 186). With regard to both aspects, there is a transition at work "from a proper name referring to a man and his films to a common word referring to a broad variety of works reflecting a 'Hitchcockian' sensibility" (Hock 185), and the director's trademark cameos have certainly contributed to this process.
The term *cameo* originally derives from a "precious stone having two layers of different colours, in the upper of which a figure is carved in relief"; in the mid-nineteenth century, the term is adapted into the language of literature and theater, designating "a small character part that stands out from the other minor parts" in some respect ("Cameo"). This notion is evoked in the contemporary use of the term in film studies, where it marks a kind of in-joke: well-known film stars may show up in minor parts that often just take seconds, thus creating a surprise effect and, often, a pleasurable experience for the viewers if they are able to spot the cameo.\(^{28}\) The history of the movie cameo starts right with the early days of commercial film-making and catches on in a celebrity-obsessed culture which attempts to keep its audience amused, evoking a "feeling of discovery and a sense of being included in something special" (van Heerden 2). The educational level of the viewer may play a role, yet the device itself always comes to achieve the same effect, no matter if the person who cameos is philosopher Marshall McLuhan (in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, 1977) or comic-book author Stan Lee, who features in the blockbuster adaptations of nearly all his works. The most famous filmmaker associated with developing the equivalent for signature in his own movies is, of course, Alfred Hitchcock, though he was certainly not the first *auteur* to resort to appearances in his own films. By his own account, his cameos started out as a necessity when not enough extras were available (Truffaut 35), yet they soon turned into a trademark phenomenon, i.e. an authorial signature which helped create a public persona cult around the director on a level usually reserved for actors, and which has turned the name into a symbol (Gandelman 76). Consequently, Hitchcock's films contain the idea of the Derridean *scripteur*, for they continue to act "and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for [...] what he seems to have signed" (Derrida 1991: 91). However, the nature of the work of art adds a further dimension: Hitchcock's public persona is a fictionalized version of someone who happens to share the same physical features as the film director Alfred Hitchcock, creating the general feeling amongst his contemporaries that there was "no real Alfred Hitchcock outside his movies" (Taylor 19). In this respect, Hitchcock may arguably represent the first stirrings of postmodernism in postwar Hollywood film and of tendencies which have

\(^{28}\) From this basic definition of the cameo, one can elaborate that its exact forms are far more diverse: the cameo may be exploited for comic effect when the artists reference their own work of the past, when there is a deliberate antithesis to the expectations towards their public personae, or when a subordinate character is enhanced by casting a famous actor in the role.
only recently become part of the stock inventory. In fact, his cameo, in typically postmodern fashion, toys with different layers of metalepses, alternating between different worlds and snapping in and out of "mnemonic and inventory-like references to the past" (Degli-Eposti 9). More recently, Zadie Smith's novel The Autograph Man – and, to a lesser extent, her follow-up novel, On Beauty – have demonstrated that the structure of cameos also works in literature, in spite of fundamental differences between the mimetic capacities of both media (cf. Schwanebeck [forthcoming]). In films, the physical presence seems to bear testimony of the creator's presence, whereas in narrative texts, we are taught to be a lot more suspicious of so-called authorial presence. In Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), for instance, the narrating I, an American author named Kurt Vonnegut claims that he "really did go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967" (1) and later met the novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, as a prisoner of war: "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (109). For Linda Hutcheon, most postmodern narratives in this fashion are but moderately successful at resisting "traditional strategies of representation" by relating to extratextual reference points (1988: 206), which is why neither the Hitchcock persona in the movies nor the narrator of a book can make a claim to be identical with the director and author, respectively.

With the exception of some filmmakers like Martin Scorsese, the serialization of the cameo effect has been Hitchcock's exclusive domain. Academic criticism still does not seem quite sure about how to assess this signature effect, though. Whilst various studies have presented taxonomies of the Hitchcock cameo, these readings all too often betray the conviction that the cameos must be read as either an authorial signature which is actually helpful in shedding light on questions of interpretation, or as a playful trick which Hitchcock employed in order to satisfy his ego and to establish his trademark silhouette as a means of "sign[ing] his product with In other cases, the cameo can also alienate the viewer and render the film self-indulgent: in Steven Soderbergh's Ocean's Twelve (2004), a central plot element is based on the assumption that the character played by Julia Roberts bears a strong resemblance to the well-known actress Julia Roberts; screenwriter Charlie Kaufman develops the whole plot of Adaptation (2002) around a fictionalised version of himself, trying to adapt a book. The Autograph Man not only toys with extratextual frames, but offers them as a playful means of signing itself; one episode in the novel links the topic of autographs and celebrities with the mise-en-abyme structure of authorial presence, as author Zadie Smith writes herself as a "lady writer" into the book (96). See Schwanebeck [forthcoming] for a detailed discussion of this episode.

This includes Raymound Bellour's psychoanalytical take on the Hitchcock cameos and Thomas Leitch's epistemological reading; cf. Walker's summary of the respective interpretations (87-97). Yacowar distinguishes emblematic cameos (that support the film's major themes) from god-like interventions of "The Maker" (270-8).
the wavy contours of his own profile" (Hüser 173). The silhouette would later become epitomized in his TV show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-65), and it is used today in the copyright warning in the *Signature Collection* DVDs (fig. 5). The discussion could benefit immensely from the Derridean notion that interpretation and (word) play are by no means mutually exclusive phenomena, and that, as Derrida demonstrates so elaborately in *Signéponge*, meaning *can* be derived from the Hitchcockian playfulness and ironic self-representation.

![Fig. 5: The Hitchcockian silhouette as a copyright warning in *The Signature Collection*](image)

The cameos perform a self-confident gesture, as a way of saying, very much in the vein of the traditional *me fecit*:

"Look, it's me" or "I did this" in the midst of a story (a suspension in disbelief) that is supposed to be complete. Movies – comedies especially – had been prone to such winks at the audience before: Groucho and Cary Grant both seem to arch an eyebrow at the camera from time to time, as if to say, "Get me out of here." But in general, that "here" in movies – the story and its place – was sacrosanct. Pictures did not allude to their own making or process. (Thomson 42)

Seen from this perspective, Hitchcock's cameos amount to the classical signature effect that we know from paintings, inscribing the work of art "in the complex network of relations of 'authority'" (Agamben 40), whilst fulfilling the Derridean structure of the *parergon*: "neither wholly inside nor outside the work" (Culler 1989: 194). The authority bestowed by Hitchcock on his own films through the cameo becomes clear if one considers the way Hitch-
cock often links his own appearance with the themes of his films, thus both underlining them and also self-mockingly admitting that it is all down to make-believe; the "intrusion of this real person into the fictional setting heighten[ing] the tension between our reality and the reality presumed by the fiction" (Yacowar 270). The list of cameos supporting this reading not only includes his appearance of his silhouette in a morgue in his last film, *Family Plot* (1975), but also him missing a bus at the beginning of *North by Northwest*, a film completely dedicated to the motif of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (fig. 6), or his exhibition of mastery over the animal kingdom by walking his terriers on a leash in *The Birds* (fig. 7).

Fig. 6-7: Hitchcock's cameo appearances in *North by Northwest* and *The Birds*
The Hitchcock persona that becomes manifest on screen even transcends Benjamin’s idea of cult of stardom as the latter is usually reserved for actors as cinematic commodities. When Hitchcock released his cinematic farewell, *Family Plot*, he did not even have to show his face – the stylized Hitchcock profile had already adopted ”the gesture of a signature” and was enough to serve as ”an ironic means of authorization” (Hüser 173).

In the following case-study, I would like to answer the question of which consequences the signature game has for the authorial appropriation of the text. The example of John Buchan’s novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (which Hitchcock adapted into *The 39 Steps* in 1935 – tellingly, the numeric spelling of the film version is usually preferred today), will serve to illustrate how the perception of authorship can change in the process of adaptation, to what extent multiple authorship is negated, and what role the overlapping signatures of different creators play in that process. Though recent discussions in adaptation studies, which are informed by poststructuralist discourse, are quite right in putting the doubtful dichotomy between ”original creation” and ”copy” under scrutiny, I still want to argue that Hitchcock’s treatment of Buchan’s source text has led to a marginalization of Buchan’s role in the creation of the modern spy-thriller. This is indicative of the overall treatment given to the authors whose works Hitchcock adapted for his thrillers: Only few suspense lovers will have heard of Josephine Tey, Frederick Knott, or Robert Bloch, though we are no doubt familiar with some of the iconic scenes which have evolved from their fiction: the frantic search for a killer amongst the dancing crowd gathered in a hotel ballroom, a blonde woman attacked by an assassin as she is answering the phone, another blonde woman who, whilst staying at a rotten motel, is suddenly attacked by the owner’s ”mother” in the shower. Apparently, the man who adapted these sequences for the screen (in 1937’s *Young and Innocent*, *Dial 'M' for Murder* and *Psycho*, respectively) managed to pull off a coup none of his villains would have gotten away with, for at a time when French literary criticism set out to murder the author (or at least diminish his importance), the young film critics of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* were celebrating Hitchcock, an *auteur* who had managed to erase the signatures of those authors whom he had chosen for adaptation.
The Overlapping Signatures of *The 39 Steps*

Alfred Hitchcock is often credited as the inventor of the previously mentioned MacGuffin plot device, a gimmick he arguably uses for the first time in his 1935 adaptation of Scottish author John Buchan's spy novel, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. However, when comparing the two texts, one may well be inclined to ask, "Whose MacGuffin is it, anyway?" For it may be Hitchcock's highly acclaimed adaptation that nowadays dominates the public perception of the story revolving around Richard Hannay and his involvement of an international spy organization – the most recent example being Patrick Barlow's successful stage adaptation, "only one of the many hybrid versions of *The 39 Steps* that have appeared over the past [seventy-five] years" (Glanacy 2003: 99), which premiered at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2005 and went on to become a box-office success in London's West End – yet the extinction of Buchan's creative signature in favor of Hitchcock's deserves a more detailed examination. Without trying to diminish the film's importance in establishing the paradigm of the sophisticated spy thriller (a topic already addressed numerous times, cf. Hare's interpretation), it is obvious that Barlow's version acknowledges Hitchcock's signature, but obliterates Buchan's.

Hitchcock presents a problematic case in the field of adaptation studies. Though the majority of his films were, in fact, adapted from literary sources, very few analyses address them as adaptations. "Who, indeed," asks Brian McFarlane, "ever thinks of Hitchcock as primarily an adaptor of other people's fictions?" (11) Some critics see the main reason for this in Hitchcock's preferred sources, i.e. the fact that he frequently adapted minor writers (Camp 230; Reuter 1-4; Boyd and Palmer 2-5). It is arguably much easier to marginalize the writer's role when this writer is considered marginal to begin with. Indeed, several studies of film adaptations have pointed out that different rules apply when the literary source does not derive from the canon:

With the adaptation of literary works less celebrated or less culturally privileged, such as minor novels or "pulp fiction," it is far less common to hear arguments about specificity and fidelity, and so the remarkable cinematic achievements of Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo* are lauded in terms of filmic specificity, while its fidelity to Thomas Narcejac and Pierre Boileau's *From Among the Dead* (1954) is rarely raised as a concern. (Corrigan 33)

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32 Boyd and Palmer elaborate on the idea of Hitchcock as an adaptor by pointing out that 41 out of his 54 films are based on literary sources (5f.).
This makes for an interesting reversal of a typical conundrum in adaptation studies: usually, the borrowing of a film from literary sources adds to the film's prestige, and the film is judged in terms of its fidelity to the source material: "It's less difficult to admire a piece of material which has already earned the endorsement of a publisher and comes with a quote on its cover heralding its genius," Anthony Minghella argues (26f.). Hitchcock's case avoids the fidelity dilemma and the inevitable binary between original and copy – certainly these are not stressed when, as in the case of Hitchcock, the connection between the films and their literary sources "has been quite deliberately occulted" (Boyd and Palmer 2). However, things are not helped by those who argue in favour of the marginalised authors, as supporters of Buchan – whom R. Barton Palmer characterises as "an interesting amalgam of H. Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle" (92) – tend to judge the films too harshly. Kate MacDonald's recent book on Buchan is a case in point, judging all adaptations of The Thirty-Nine Steps as "inadequate [...] when measured against the original book" (177). Whilst a position like MacDonald's is hard to accept for scholars working in adaptation studies, it is perfectly understandable if one considers the marginal role of many writers who produce genre fiction, as they are usually not held in very high esteem by literary critics. This very much applies to those authors whose works were adapted for the screen by Hitchcock and whose names are familiar to few people, with some prominent exceptions (such as Joseph Conrad, Daphne du Maurier, or Patricia Highsmith) – as of yet, none of the comprehensive studies on the cinematic and literary influences on young Hitchcock has been able to shatter his canonization as an idiosyncratic genius.33

The reason for this partly lies with the cult surrounding Hitchcock, partly with Hitchcock himself. In his conversation with Truffaut, Hitchcock seldom discusses the importance of the novelists whom he selected for adaptation; and when he does so, it happens in order to savage the book, as in the case of Psycho (Truffaut 268). The same holds true for the role of Hitchcock's screenwriters. On the one hand, Hitchcock never took a credit for having contributed to the screenplay of his films (though he closely collaborated with most of the writers who were hired to work for him), on the other hand, only few of his screenwriters actually received appropriate recognition for their work (usually because they were already household names in the world of literature, such as Raymond Chandler or Thornton Wilder). Consequently, we are still stuck with the dilemma that whenever we talk about Hitchcock's signature style and his characteristic plot structures, we use his name metonymically for the whole Hitchcock factory, i.e. the long list of

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33 See the studies by Jensen, Orr, and Ryall 1996.
collaborators who were involved in creating the films and who tend to be overlooked (a list that would also include Alma Reville, Hitchcock's wife of more than 50 years, who happened to be a screenwriter).  

Although Hitchcock's appropriation of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* arguably involves a number of such incongruities, there can be no doubt that his version turned a traditional adventure narrative, firmly rooted in its pre-World War I context, into a more timeless piece. In both texts, London-based adventurer Richard Hannay becomes entangled in an affair of espionage and has to go on the run from the police. Because he is a murder suspect, he hides in the Scottish moors and has to rely on his wits in order escape his enemies on numerous occasions. Ultimately, Hannay returns to England, identifies the true culprits and clears his name. The plot moves swiftly in the fast-paced film version, as a result of which the viewers do not mind that they are mostly left in the dark regarding the conspiracy. By replacing the novel's far-fetched ploy with a classical MacGuffin scenario – that screenwriter's dream, an ever-elusive device "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," to paraphrase *Macbeth* – Hitchcock opts for a rather abstract game of shadows, smoke and mirrors. Though both Buchan's novel and Hitchcock's film remain equally vague about the exact agenda of the enemy, the general vagueness of the film has allowed it to age considerably better, and the smooth, matinee idol version of Hannay as embodied by actor Robert Donat presents a far less troubling version of model masculinity.

Political controversy aside, Buchan's novel sticks to the promise laid out in his brief foreword – to deliver a "romance where the incidents defy the probabilities, and march just inside the borders of the possible" (n.p.). Consequently, Richard Hannay impersonates the kind of hypermasculine hero that will rise to any occasion, invoking an image of manhood that seems to belong "in the 'Boy's Own Paper adventure category' derived from a nineteenth century British Imperial and colonial ethos" (Ryall 1993: 155). This man feels as comfortable in a fistfight as he does running across the Scot-

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34 A few recent publications have begun to correct this impression: Hitchcock's daughter Pat dedicated a book to the memory of her mother (*Alma Hitchcock: The Woman behind the Man*, 2003), Steven DeRosa examines the collaboration between Hitchcock and screenwriter John Michael Hayes (*Writing with Hitchcock*, 2011), and some authors (such as Ernest Lehman, the screenwriter of *North by Northwest*) have been invited to record audio commentaries for Hitchcock's films in order to give their perspectives.

35 Buchan's narrative toys with the idea of a Jewish plan for world domination. Though the theory that "a little white-faced Jew in a bath-chair with an eye like a rattlesnake" (8) is behind the mysterious affair is soon rejected and the conspiracy turns out to be of German origin, the fact that Hannay as the novel's protagonist is willing to buy into that idea leaves a bitter taste (cf. the discussion of the novel's anti-Semitic elements in Glancy 2003: 11f.). Hitchcock's film avoids such pitfalls: it does not go beyond a few allusions to the political climate of the time (especially Oswald Mosley and the fascist movement in Britain), rendering the villains trans-national.
tish moors, relying both on his physical skills, experience in the colonies, and the art of quick change.\textsuperscript{36} Were Hannay not to take himself seriously all the time, he might as well be a descendant of Baron von Münchhausen, his derring-do going far beyond mere suspension of disbelief. Having miraculously survived both a car crash and an explosion, Hannay catches up with his enemies, and demonstrates impressive vision and cunning linguistic skills (he is fluent in German and thus able to overhear the villains' conversation) in the process, but he also has to rely on pure coincidence (on his flight through the Scottish moors, Hannay even runs into an old acquaintance). The villains remain an obscure, minor threat: at one point, they lock Hannay up in a cellar full of explosives, which allows the protagonist to blow up his prison and go on the run. What gives Hannay more trouble than his German foes is the ennui and melancholia that will befall any adventurer whom the world deprives of a challenge. Never is he more in the dumps than before his adventure, "yawning [his] head off all day," effectively feeling "the best bored man in the United Kingdom" (4), and never is he happier than when the police erroneously pursue him and national security is at stake. Saving the Empire is but a pleasant side-effect that happens to coincide with Hannay's own agenda, "schoolboy game[s] of hare and hounds" (75). Effectively demonstrating that a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, Hannay arrives in time to save the day, immune both to mortal danger and (as a stern narrator who takes his mission extremely seriously) irony.

Judging from these characteristics, Buchan's tale of adventure should have presented a story that could easily be put on screen, but it appears that Hitchcock was in two minds about The Thirty-Nine Steps. He certainly recognized the strengths of Buchan's writing,\textsuperscript{37} most notably the novel's quickfire plot, and on the film's initial release, Hitchcock acknowledged that Buchan had provided him with "a rattling good book" (Hitchcock 18). However, he also emphasized that major alterations regarding the plot had been necessary in order to produce a good film, causing him to "ignor[e] the book as it stood" (ibid.). This approach has since been identified as Hitchcock's

\textsuperscript{36} To Hannay, there is a clear difference between his encounters with death in the colonies, and the murder affair he finds himself entangled in: "I had seen men die violently before; indeed I had killed a few myself in the Matabele war; but this cold-blooded indoor business was different" (19). His time in the colonies has also taught him a lesson or two about the art of disguise: the ability to adapt is more important than mere dressing-up: "A fool tries to look different: a clever man looks the same and is different" (134).

\textsuperscript{37} When an interviewer asked him about his favourite writers in 1976, Hitchcock named Buchan, together with Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Agatha Christie (Hare 312). It is interesting to note that Buchan is the only one amongst them whose work Hitchcock adapted for the screen (though he collaborated with Chandler for his Patricia Highsmith adaptation, Strangers on a Train, 1951), as Hitchcock tended to avoid whodunits, due to their limited cinematic potential.
preferred method of adaptation: "he does not seek fidelity to his source, but rather takes an idea, or the kernel of a plot, and rethinks it in terms of his own thematic and formal interests" (McDougal 238). What was left of the plot after Hitchcock and his screenwriters, Charles Bennett and Ian Hay, had set down to work bore not many resemblances to Buchan’s novel. Differences and similarities aside, The 39 Steps has proved a beloved classic. The casting of Robert Donat in the leading role certainly added some sorely needed irony to the scenario – his helplessness in some situations, barely hidden by a smirk, allows the viewer to sense the underlying "problematics of masculinity" (Ryall 1993: 165) which are also highlighted in the mise-en-scène on numerous occasions. Whereas the novel hardly presents any female characters to speak of, Hitchcock includes various satirical stabs at the institution of marriage. Pairings like the Jordan family, the crofter and his young wife, as well as Hannay and Pamela (who pose as newly-weds in order to make an escape) provide early examples of the characteristic Hitchcockian take on marriage, later epitomized in the cynicism of Rear Window (1954) or Frenzy. Most critics hold The 39 Steps in very high esteem for its surreal, almost anarchic spirit, which Hitchcock would later fully develop in North by Northwest, a film that shares a lot of DNA with The 39 Steps (and, arguably, with the Buchan novel). It seems rather peculiar that Buchan’s contribution to the genre of the spy adventure has been relatively neglected in many studies. For instance, Jocelyn Camp’s 1978 article is one of the very few analyses to link Hitchcock’s most iconic scene to Buchan’s The Thirty-Nine Steps. The novel features a chapter where Hannay, feeling secure in the open space, suddenly finds himself chased by an airplane, the "free moorlands" of Scotland suddenly turning into "prison walls" (61). This event is not featured in Hitchcock’s 39 Steps, but the similarities with the crop-duster sequence in North by Northwest are striking, to say the least. Buchan arguably deserves some share of the credit which

\[\text{Signatures}\]
tends to be reserved for Hitchcock when it comes to the invention of "the concept of Open Spaces Claustrophobia" (Hare 16). Camp may be overly optimistic when she, having pointed out this connection between Buchan's story and the crop-duster scene, goes on to argue that Hitchcock would be the first to acknowledge "that he owes much to the popular novelist" (239). On the contrary, when discussing the scene with Hitchcock, Truffaut declares that "[o]nly a director" could have dreamt up "an idea like that" (256), and Hitchcock does not contradict him, accepting full credit for the scene. It speaks volumes that Patrick Barlow's stage version of The 39 Steps includes the plane episode from Buchan's novel, but the dialogue between the two pilots ensures that the scene bears Hitchcock's signature, not Buchan's:

Pilot 1. There he is. Over there!
Pilot 2. Which direction’s that then?
Pilot 1. North-by-North West!
(39 Steps 34)

Critics like Robin Wood, who are generally more dismissive of Hitchcock’s British œuvre, turn this argument around and call The 39 Steps an inferior version of North by Northwest (Wood 246), without diminishing the Hitchcockian signature in favor of Buchan’s, merely differentiating between a less and a more refined Hitchcock. The subsequent adaptations of Buchan’s novel bear further testimony to the fact that Buchan’s signature is nearly obliterated. As Hutcheon argues, later writers who worked on different versions of The Thirty-Nine Steps in fact "adapted Alfred Hitchcock's dark and cynical 1935 film adaptation along with the novel" (2006: 21). As far as Hitchcock is concerned, it is worth stressing the paradoxical nature of this auteurist triumph again: Roland Barthes signs the author’s death certificate, whilst François Truffaut lays the foundations for the monumentalization of Hitchcock. Hitchcock’s case demonstrates that the classificatory function of authorship (which, according to Foucault, is one of the major reasons why the author cannot be done away with in literary discourse) can even be fulfilled by an adaptor who extinguishes the actual scripteur (Buchan) and turns the Thirty-Nine Steps into his very own 39 Steps, seemingly verifiable through the MacGuffin, blonde women, a cameo, the man on the run-motif, and many other trademarks. As a brief look at Barlow's stage adaptation will manage to tie up all the loose ends in the nick of time shows that Hitchcock may owe some of his economic storytelling to John Buchan.
show, Hitchcock's film "does not merely compete with the novel on equal terms" but has already "superseded the book in the collective imagination" (Hesse 148), thus unduly exploiting the alleged generosity of Buchan who, according to the foreword to Barlow's play, "was never proprietorial about his work" (n.p.).

The fact that the latest episode in the history of The 39 Steps (Robert Towne's long-rumored, yet to be greenlit remake aside) is set on the London theatre stage means that Richard Hannay's journey has come full circle, as it were. After all, Hitchcock's film ends with the symbolic on-stage death of Mr. Memory, whose incredible brain capacity enables him to remember the secret formula which serves as the film's MacGuffin. Memory's sophisticated manner already appeared significantly outdated at the time of the film's release; the Edwardian entertainer reduced to a tool in the hands of the schemers (Durgnat 125-31). Hitchcock's film not only renders Mr. Memory a remnant of the music-hall era, but may also, via its box-office success, have played a role in the decline of the music-hall tradition in general (Murphy 47; MacDonald 173). The fact that Hannay's journey is currently being re-enacted on the English stage bears a degree of irony which Hitchcock himself might have appreciated. In addition to being regularly performed at London's Criterion Theatre, the play is also produced by touring companies, on Broadway, and throughout many European countries, a level of success usually reserved for musical shows like Mamma Mia! or The Producers. Apparently, the producers who have turned Richard Hannay's swashbuckling antics into a stage phenomenon did not quite act in the same spirit of generosity that is attributed to Buchan in the foreword to the published text of Barlow's stage version. The text contains extensive copyright information, as well as billing and credit requirements, according to which "[t]he name of the Author [sic!] must appear on a separate line on which no other name appears, immediately following the title and must appear in size of type not less than fifty per cent of the size of the title type" (n.p.). Evidently, this specification appears somewhat problematical – after all, who is Barlow's capitalized Author, i.e. who bears the most powerful signature? The published play text comes with the following annotations:

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42 The analysis of the play is based on the published paperback edition of Barlow's text as well as my own recollection of a performance I attended at London's Criterion Theatre in July, 2008.
Effectively, the adaptor (Barlow) is put in front of the novelist (Buchan), who comes before the film director (Hitchcock), who is in turn (and illogically) followed by the two men who conceived of the concept for the adaptation (later to be reworked by Barlow). This illustrates how adaptation can complicate the notion of authorship, especially when it comes to acknowledging sources. In Barlow's play (in itself a rather imbalanced but highly amusing affair) Hitchcock plays a much more central role than Buchan, although the poster (and advertising campaign) give the title as "John Buchan's 'The 39 Steps'," which makes it an amalgamation of both Buchan's version (in name) and Hitchcock's (in spelling). Barlow's adaptation employs Buchan's first-person narrator and turns him into a stage manager figure similar to the ones employed in Epic theatre. This extradiegetic frame compensates for the few cases where the elaborate stage technique either fails to provide the full picture (e.g. Hannay's background story), and it also allows for a double-layered conversation which seems to reflect the authorial struggle surrounding the play, as Hannay and the Professor (i.e. the evil mastermind behind the conspiracy) fight for narrative control over the tale, with the professor insisting that "[t]his is not your story. This is my story! And I decide how it ends" (75). Apart from these metatextual moments, Barlow's version adds slapstick comedy, puns and visual jokes to the tale, providing the kind of "surplus value" which audiences expect from a stage adaptation of a well-known film (Hesse 146). The numerous forays into broad comedy include Pamela's mentioning of her uncle Bob, prompting Hannay to inquire, "Bob's your uncle?" (72), some linguistic confusion between Hannay and German spy Annabella (who also resorts to swearing in her mother-tongue), Hannay's farcical struggle with the blinds in his flat and an oversized map of Scotland, or the portrayal of Mr. Memory as a clownish, undignified character who struggles with hard words. The overall effect is enhanced by the casting, as the actor playing Hannay is the only one not to switch roles throughout the play, with an actress filling most of the female roles and two clowns providing the supporting cast (including Mr. Memory, the crofter, the Jordans, the inn-keepers, salesmen, pilots, policemen, and thugs), sometimes switching roles within a single scene. There is more to the comical
DNA of *The 39 Steps*: the spoofing of genre clichés and the comic exploitation of alienation effects in the Brechtian vein are reminiscent of classical film parodies like *Airplane!* (1980) or the works of Mel Brooks, not to mention Barlow's other plays (like *The Messiah*, a farcical rewriting of the nativity story) and the popular pastiches of The Reduced Shakespeare Company. The script provides various moments of awkwardness for the actors who constantly have to break character (as well as the fourth wall). A phone keeps ringing long after Hannay has picked it up, a quick appearance by the two clowns at the margins of the stage in order to imitate a POV shot from the film is ruined by their lateness, and several quick costume changes on the train platform and the constant role reversal see "Hannay the actor" unable to "take any more" (according to the stage direction), causing him to shout at the others to "just get on with it!" (20) It is all in good fun, though one cannot quite lose the feeling that the figure of Monty Python's stern major (played by Graham Chapman) is about to burst into the scene and shut everything down due to the sheer amount of silliness involved. The play's most remarkable feature, however, is its repeated acknowledgement of the realm of cinema (not only Hitchcock's), which features much more prominently than any literary (or theatrical) intertext. Many scenes (including Hannay's escape from the train) are played for their cinematic quality, evoking the conventions of flashback, editing and montage; another stage direction requires the actress playing Pamela to scream "Fay Wray style" (75), a nod to *King Kong*'s lead actress, film history's first 'scream queen'. In addition, the play references various Hitchcock films: apart from the *North by Northwest* quip in the airplane scene, Hannay is also advised to escape by the "rear window" (32). This game of spot-the-reference is presented in the manner of a good-humored parody, and there is not a lot to support Beatrix Hesse's impression that the stage version takes a critical stance towards Hitchcock's films and their underlying misogyny.\(^{43}\) Some of the darker undercurrents of Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*,

\(^{43}\) According to Hesse, the fact that all female characters are played by just one actress in Barlow's play means that the audience can perceive them all as functionalized versions of
such as the eerie scenes involving the Jordan family (beneath whose surface of hospitality lies some of the 'banality of evil' which Hannah Arendt attributed to the Nazis), are sacrificed in favor of an Old Mother Riley routine, as one of the two clowns plays Mrs. Jordan, and the other one milks the scene for silliness, "forgetting" to hide the top joint of his finger (which is a required deformity for the character of Professor Jordan in Hitchcock's film, not in the novel). Thus, Barlow's text counts on the audience's knowledge of the film in order to get the references. Much of the play’s success may be attributed to the fact that most of the film's iconic scenes are included in the stage version, which demonstrates that the audience’s response to adaptations still depends a lot on the idea of a given original which must be 'faithfully' adopted, in spite of the theoretical problems which surround this approach – not to mention the added complication that, in this case, the so-called original (i.e. Hitchcock's film) is an adaptation itself. Barlow's play quite openly rejects the possibility of being judged on its own merits, as it acknowledges Hitchcock's signature on every occasion. The same principle is at work in the poster for the stage version (fig. 8): the drawing features Richard Hannay clinging to a driving train, about to be hit by an oncoming vehicle; an image which is reminiscent of the train sequence in The 39 Steps (fig. 9), but actually refers to one particular shot in The Lady Vanishes (1938), another one of Hitchcock's British spy thrillers in which Hitchcock already had begun to quote himself – the oncoming train is included in The Lady (fig. 10), but not in The 39 Steps. The physiognomy of the poster Hannay resembles Lady's Michael Redgrave more than Robert Donat.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ femininity, all of which are exclusively defined by their relation to Hannay (151-3). However, Hesse does not mention that some characters (like Mrs. Jordan) are also played by the clowns, whereby femininity is subjected to comic stereotype again. Fittingly, though, the drawing also resembles Peter O'Toole, who has no connection with the Hitchcock canon, but who inherited Robert Donat's other iconic role, the part of devoted teacher Charles Edward Chipping in Goodbye, Mr. Chips when Herbert Ross directed a musical remake of that classic film in 1969.
Fig. 9-10: The poster's two sources in the Hitchcock canon
(The 39 Steps and The Lady Vanishes)

Though Barlow’s play features several nods to John Buchan, too, these are largely situated in paratexts circulating as publicity materials, not on the level of the text itself. With regard to the controversial question of its dominating signature, the stage adaptation of The 39 Steps declares Hitchcock a clear winner, though be it under false premises. The satirical agenda of Hitchcock's film and its various satirical stabs at Britishness are excluded or watered down, which means that his signature is arguably just as prone to adulteration as Buchan's was to the appropriation by the powerful auteur. Nothing could be a better proof of Foucault’s claim that we employ the idea of authorship in order to "neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts," and to give us the illusion of "a certain unity of writing" (288). Ultimately, both Buchan’s and Hitchcock’s signatures are prone to the mechanisms of adaptation, where the individual components can adapt to

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45 In addition to bearing his name on the poster, the program for the play dedicates three full pages to Buchan’s biographical background and two more to his influence on the British spy adventure. Hitchcock’s film is mentioned briefly, but no exclusive space is reserved for the director.

46 In terms of the depiction of Britishness, Barlow’s play is a benign, nostalgic revue that trivializes the horrors occasionally hinted at in Buchan’s novel (where the code of honor between gentlemen is firmly intact, though the ending suggests that the respectable façade of Britishness must not be trusted: the German spies are hiding behind the mask of distinguished gentlemen living in cottages, displaying public school photographs). Hitchcock’s film adopts an even more critical distance by turning Hannay into a Canadian citizen who experiences hostility everywhere on his flight and is betrayed when looking for help. The stage version, however, presents a humorous parade of clichéd Britishness and features quips on the BBC (17), self-referential jokes on the London West End (2), lewd limericks and panto routines. The villains are no longer brilliant impersonators passing as Englishmen, but monstrous hunns with unmistakeable accents: “The Thirty-nine Steps […] is mein own brilliant idea! […] You – you – think you can pull ze vool? Ach!!” (41)
"new environments by virtue of mutation […]. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish" (Hutcheon 2006: 32).

Great White Male Artists: Signature's Gender Bias

The Hitchcockian signature has not only come under scrutiny for its marginalization of collaborators and source novelists. Feminist critics of the 1970s positioned themselves against a one-sided canonization of the *auteur*, arguing that Hitchcockian cinema was dominated by the logic of the male gaze (Mulvey), that its voyeuristic subject position largely reflected a male-dominated perspective, and that femininity in Hitchcock films usually boiled down to an inflexible repertoire of stereotypes: the ghost of the phallic mother that borders over Bates' Motel (*Psycho*), the frigid heroine that effectively needs to be raped in order to be cured from her criminal ways (*Marnie*, 1964), personified stubbornness associated with the threat of domestication and marriage (*Rear Window*), and the omnipresent heroine of the Grace Kelly-type, an archetype that would become known as the 'Hitchcock blonde', and that Hitchcock himself characterized thus: "Sex on the screen should be suspenseful, I feel. If sex is too blatant or obvious, there's no suspense. […] An English girl, looking like a school-teacher, is apt to get into a cab with you and, to your surprise, she'll probably pull a man's pants open" (Hitchcock qtd. in Truffaut 224).

Seminal studies like Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (1988) point at a strong "sexual asymmetry" in Hitchcock as far as "desire and its punishment (where men possess the desire and women receive the punishment)" were concerned (Modleski 14), and the critics turned the *auteur* principle against Hitchcock by linking the inherent misogyny of his films to the director's own consciousness (Modleski 3). Some of the recurring arguments in this discussion may appear outdated, but the idea of viewing the authorial signature as biased in terms of its gender dimension is not far-fetched. One should remember that the key assumptions of the debate surrounding authenticity – that it is fragmented, contested and, ultimately, performative (Funk, Groß and Huber 13) – very much apply to the gender system, as well. Since signatures, as conventional signifiers of the so-called authentic, are very much pillars of the social order, they also contribute to the monolithic patriarchal framework of traditional historiography. This is not only reflected in the implicit assumptions which guide Smith's *Autograph Man* or Sherlock Holmes in his deductions, as we could see. Impostors rely on this ideological bias, too: they forge their way into the
patriarchal order to fulfil their desire to belong. As a brief episode in Mann’s *Felix Krull* illustrates, the signature can even turn into an indicator of the son’s project to outdo his father. In this episode, Felix observes the Marquis de Venosta’s signature so as to copy it:

"Inherited or invented?" I asked, taking the fountain pen.  
"Inherited," he said. "Papa does it just that way. Only not so well," he added.  
"And so you have over-reached him." (*Krull* 223)

In his dissertation (*The System of Objects*, 1968), Baudrillard argues that the demand for authenticity always implies the search for origins and that it always "stems from the Father: the Father is the source of value here" (2005: 81). It is the orientation towards "parental transcendence" that guides our attention to the signature (81), and which links the privilege of signing to the male artist; even though "[t]he origin of the father as origin" is rather obscure, or "lost in an aporia" (Kamuf 289). Be that as it may, this state of affairs also accounts for the significance bestowed upon the act of naming in the Garden of Eden: it is Adam as the first *signator* who assigns names to all creatures; names that always correspond to "the specific nature and virtue of the named animal" (Agamben 35). Since then, history has affirmed that the act of naming has by and large remained a patriarchal privilege, and a gesture of masculine authority (Gludovatz 2011: 20f.), the rhetoric strategies of which are that of a (gendered) form of imperialism which critics like Gayatri Spivak see at work in the colonial mechanisms of naming and mapping (Cherry 54f.). To name but one example: the signature debate is indicative of the way that female artists were systematically excluded from the canon, for the practice of signing involves the problem of establishing one’s own name and applying it with authority (Cherry 45). The 1980s discussion between Nancy Miller and Peggy Kamuf reflects a number of aspects in this controversial debate, with Miller insisting on the importance of names and signatures for the establishment of female authorship, and Kamuf responding that women should never lay claim to their own signatures, for the whole act of naming is part of a patriarchal signifying process to begin with, and should instead look "behind the mask of the proper name, the sign that secures our patriarchal heritage: the father’s name and the index of sexual identity" (Kamuf 286). Whenever a female signature was acknowledged, this concession was but a Pyrrhic victory: the fact that feminism in the 1970s claimed – in various manifestations – that

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47 See Gludovatz’s discussion of the way female artists have made use of signatures (2011: 220).
the female artistic sensibility stood for an immediate form of radical subjectivity ultimately brought about a cultural climate in which the female voice was taken to be synonymous with inwardness and the realm of private, domestic experience (Knaller 20-3). Thus, we may not have evolved quite as much from the late nineteenth-century state of affairs and the climate of the Victorian era, where it appeared as a matter of course for Sherlock Holmes, to identify "a scrawling, feminine hand" on a piece of paper, and to immediately conclude that the simple note reads "like a love affair" (Case-Book 218).

The rhetorical strategies at work in signature discourse point in a similar direction: Just like discussions in the field of gender studies, the signature debate is guided by the logic of the supplement. There is no such thing as originality in itself, and "the idea of the original is created by the copies" (Culler 2011: 12). We have seen this principle at work in every aspect of the signature machine: "[J]ust as there is never a pure sign without signature, neither is it possible ever to separate and move the signature to an originary position (even as supplement)" (Agamben 79). In art history, too, the celebration of the original and of the artistic genius usually happens at the expense of the female subject, although even the most powerful signifier requires the marginalized 'Other' to define its own position. Critics like Linda Nochlin or Marlite Halbertsma have aptly demonstrated that the apotheosis of the male genius led to the degradation of women as mere imitators of style without a signature of their own, who were deemed incapable by nature to create and to succeed in the public realm (Halbertsma 176). Stefan Römer points out that this has led to some rather bizarre consequences in the rhetoric of art history, where forgery is often personified as female and invoked with all the characteristics of a disease (350). However, when viewed on its own, the idea of the original appears fragile and inconsistent, as we could see in the différant practice of signing, which very much depends on the act of comparing and on supplementarity, yet cherishes the fiction of absolute presence. Derrida repeatedly stresses the link between the production of proper names, and the writing system that depends on signatures, for a name is very much a manifestation of writing-power: "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute" (1998b: 78). The obscure desire for an origin that can never be grasped links gender and signature, not to mention that both depend on the performative dimension of cultural utterances. As practices "grounded in repetition" (Neef 228), signatures are characterized by the same
conventions which Judith Butler detects at the heart of the gender system, where

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport or express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 185)

Thus, as one of the ritual social dramas outlined by Butler (whose work owes a debt to Pierre Bourdieu, amongst others), the signature "requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (ibid. 191). This means that, in order to legitimize one questionable practice of the social system (the gender system), we invoke an even more fragile and questionable ritual which should be unambiguous in order to provide a stable bond between signifier and signified, but which boils down to an "exemplary figure of ambiguity" (Gludovatz 2011: 221, my translation).48

It is through constant practice and repetition that the questionable and the ambiguous become ritualized and adapted into the rites of institution outlined by Bourdieu: strategies that serve the purpose "of assigning properties of a social nature in a way that makes them seem like properties of natural nature" (Bourdieu 118). This is very much a gendered practice insofar as the underlying rhetorical strategies are frequently invoked in order to substantiate the difference between the sexes. Any attempt to affix a signature amounts to the containing of "an unlimited textual system" and to the installation of "a measure of protection between this boundlessness and one’s own power to know" (Kamuf 297). It is this dimension of the signature conundrum which continues to be overlooked in our everyday (gendered) practice, and which we must continue to challenge, not just when deciphering our various scribbles.

48 The same applies to the signature's semiotic statues, as Claude Gandelman points out. The signature is not only "at the crossroads between index and symbols, [but] often at at [sic!] double crossroads between symbol, index and icon" (105).
Signing Off

It is in the nature of the essay as a text-type to draw upon a variety of findings, which inevitably means selecting some and having to marginalize other crucial aspects: regrettably, there are many fields which could not be included in this study at all, such as signatures in music.\textsuperscript{49} Yet, it was the aim of this study to hint at the wider implications of the signature debate, and the various examples employed here were deliberately taken from a number of different media in order to support this agenda. The discursive fields invoked here are diverse, but they all refer back to very ancient mechanisms: mainly the idea of viewing signatures "as a symptom of [...] the individual" (Rubin 570), for inasmuch as we, by practicing our signature, "convince ourselves that we and our names are one," we come to "take an identity in the eyes of the world." (Auster and Coetzee 82) In addition to allegedly identifying its scripteur beyond doubt, there is another belief surrounding them, one which was already invoked by Paracelsus: "that all things bear a sign that manifests and reveals their invisible qualities" (Agamben 33).

It has been my aim to draw attention to the various argumentative pitfalls which this belief entails, and – by way of an overview of different engagements with the topic in the realms of philosophy and literature – to highlight, as well as to problematize, both the aura we grant signatures and the power we attribute to them in terms of identity politics, their ambiguous nature notwithstanding. Our signatures constitute who we are, yet the frequently articulated claims of authenticity and originality which surround them invite deconstructive readings. As they are prone to forgery, their importance arguably rests on an extremely fragile arrangement of signifiers. Evidently, there may be more to the classic Stevie Wonder song, "Signed Sealed Delivered," than meets the eye. Unless we cease to invest the signature game with unfounded expectations and an exaggerated sense of awe, we are bound to remain under its spell.

\textsuperscript{49} One could refer to composers like Johann Sebastian Bach or Dmitri Shostakovich, who would hide their individual signatures as little cryptograms in the score: Bach would use the sequence B, A, C, H (H being the German equivalent to B natural) in The Art of Fugue (posth. 1751), whereas Shostakovich frequently used the sequence D, Es (E flat), C, H. Robert Schumann used the sequence C-H-A in Kinderszenen (1838) to invoke the Italianized version of his wife's name, Clara.
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