

# Writing After Death: Posthumous Autofiction and Authorship in João Paulo Cuenca's *Descobri que estava morto* (2015)

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**ABSTRACT:** Der brasilianische Schriftsteller João Paulo Cuenca hat im Jahr 2015 mit dem Roman *Descobri que estava morto* einen Text veröffentlicht, der eine „skandalöse“ Auseinandersetzung mit dem eigenen Tod im Medium der Autofiktion zum Gegenstand hat. Der „Tod des Autors“ ist jedoch hierbei nicht nur auf der Ebene der Romanhandlung das zentrale Thema, sondern ist auch auf der Ebene metaliterarischer Reflexion zu berücksichtigen. Nachdem der Erzähler J. P. Cuenca damit konfrontiert wird, fälschlicherweise für tot erklärt worden zu sein, steuert er im Zuge einer schriftstellerischen und identitären Krise auf seinen eigenen Tod hin. Der vorliegende Artikel arbeitet heraus, wie der Roman verschiedene Konzepte von Autorschaft inszeniert und zu deren kritischer Hinterfragung einlädt. Schließlich wird das spielerische Self-Fashioning von João Paulo Cuenca beleuchtet, der auf den autofiktionalen Diskurs zurückgreift, um gegenüber dem Literatur- und Kulturbetrieb eine subversive „posture“ einzunehmen.

**SCHLAGWORTE:** Autofiktion; brasilianische Literatur; João Paulo Cuenca; Autorschaft; Tod des Autors

**KEYWORDS:** Autofiction; Brazilian Literature; João Paulo Cuenca; Authorship; Death of the Author

## 1 Introduction

I won't ever be able to return to the Trastevere district of Rome and enter the Libreria del Cinema without thinking that here, on the night of July 14, 2008, the great J.P. Cuenca died, a young Brazilian author I admired, and whom I was sure would become one of the great writers of Latin America. Simulation and disappearance, subjects treated with kid gloves, were the linchpins of his narrative, and I have no doubt that, had he carried on living and writing, he would have been capable of anything, even of writing after death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Published on the website of Mertin Literary Agency: [http://www.mertin-litag.de/authors\\_htm/Cuenca-JP.htm](http://www.mertin-litag.de/authors_htm/Cuenca-JP.htm), 04/03/2019.

This obituary notice was written by well-known Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas and represents the posthumous praise of a Brazilian author who had prospects of becoming one of Latin America's greatest writers and whose predominant literary topics of simulation and disappearance are very close to Vila-Matas' own literary preoccupations.<sup>2</sup> This short text, especially its last phrase, demonstrates how the "myth of an author" can be created and particularly advanced by the biographical event of an early death. However, this obituary was never published in the feuilleton of a newspaper or in a magazine but in the blurb of a book written by the mourned author. This book is entitled *Descobri que estava morto* and was published in 2015. But its allegedly deceased author is effectively not dead: João Paulo Cuenca, born in 1978, is one of the most out-ranking younger writers of contemporary Brazilian literature, who is also working as a journalist, a blogger and a film-maker. As a critical observer of the social conditions in his home country, Cuenca repeatedly came to the fore as a keen critic of the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. During the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, his severe criticism even made international headlines: after writing biweekly columns for the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) in spring 2020, DW dismissed Cuenca immediately on June 18, 2020 for a statement on Twitter where he alluded to an 18<sup>th</sup> century quotation of Jean Meslier by tweeting that "O brasileiro só será livre quando o último Bolsonaro for enforcado nas tripas do último pastor da Igreja Universal".<sup>3</sup> Cuenca's dismissal caused outrage among many journalists internationally and was even discussed at the German government press conference on June 29, 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Cuenca's literary debut as writer dates back to 2002 and the publication of his first novel *Corpo presente*. He published two other novels, *O dia Mastroianni* in 2007 and *O único final feliz para uma história de amor é um acidente* in 2010, before releasing *Descobri que estava morto*, his most successful novel yet, which was awarded the best novel of the year by the Brazilian Biblioteca Nacional. The title already gives a precise notion of the topic of the book: the confrontation with death from the perspective of a first-person-narrator. But this first-

<sup>2</sup> For a general survey of Vila-Matas' oeuvre see Cristina Oñoro Otero, *Enrique Vila-Matas. Juegos, ficciones, silencios* (Madrid: Visor Libros, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Cuenca later commented on his tweet on BuzzFeed News, see João Paulo Cuenca, "Opinião: O bolsonarismo vence quando um editor se enforca nas tripas de um escritor", <https://www.buzzfeed.com/br/jpcuenca/opiniao-o-bolsonarismo-vence-quando-um-editor-se-enforca>, 03/08/2020.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenzen/regierungs-pressekonferenz-vom-29-juni-2020-1764884>, 03/08/2020.

person-narrator who learns about his legal death is identical with João Paulo Cuenca, the author of this novel. Hence, the union of the book's protagonist, narrator and author suggests that *Descobri que estava morto* can be counted among an increasing number of contemporary Brazilian novels which recur to the discourse model of autofiction.<sup>5</sup> In addition to 21<sup>st</sup> century authors representing autofiction in Brazil, such as Michel Laub, Luiz Ruffato or Ricardo Lísias, there are also several Brazilian writers, for instance Silviano Santiago, Chico Buarque or João Gilberto Noll, whose texts already published in the last century have contributed to contemporary debates on Brazilian autofiction.<sup>6</sup>

When Serge Doubrovsky classified his "novel" *Fils* (1977) under the notion of "autofiction", he could not foresee the influence his discursive model would exert on writers over the course of the following decades. Although narrating one self's personal life in a literary text does not necessarily imply provocative effects, a striking number of texts conceived within the frame of autofictional discourse used to provoke controversies, even scandals after their publication. Probably the first "autofictional scandal" was provoked by Doubrovsky's *Le livre brisé* (1989) dealing with the author's conjugal life. In this book, Doubrovsky's spouse Ilse is presented as the first reader of the work-in-progress but as she died during its redaction, several critics questioned the ethical dimension of an autofictional narration that could be related to the alleged suicide of the author's wife.<sup>7</sup> If a literary publication causes a general public outrage, it must be emphasized that a scandal triggered by a text conceived in autofictional discourse differs from a scandal caused by a mere fiction: As a "*Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels*"<sup>8</sup> and with its union of author, narrator and protagonist, an autofictional text gives its readers

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<sup>5</sup> For autofictional discourse in contemporary Brazilian literature see Luciene Almeida de Azevedo, "Autoficção e literatura contemporânea", *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada* 12 (2008): 31-49.

<sup>6</sup> In the last years, autofiction and the so-called "escritas de si" have become very popular research topics among Brazilian literary theorists. See, for instance, Diana Irene Klinger, *Escritas de si, escritas do outro: o retorno do autor e a virada etnográfica* (Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2007); Anna Faedrich Martins, *Autoficções. Do conceito teórico à prática na literatura brasileira*, Tese de doutorado na área de Teoria da Literatura (Porto Alegre: Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, 2014); *Ensaio sobre a autoficção*, ed. by Jovita Maria G. Noronha (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2014); or the special issues dedicated to the "escritas de si" of the journals *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada* 12 (2008) and *Matraga* 42 (2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Hélène Jaccopard, "Que brise *Le livre brisé* de Serge Doubrovsky?", *Littérature* 92 (1993): 37-51.

<sup>8</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 10.

the possibility to call writers to account for their literarily narrated actions. Giving interviews or making statements regarding their scandalous autofictional publication, writers are able to influence the image of their public persona in the media, thus performing a certain “posture”.<sup>9</sup> Eventually dissolving the confines of literary text and reality, they can follow the guidelines of autofictional discourse and pursue strategies of literary self-fashioning by extending constructions of their identity via self-representations on television, in magazines or social media. The interplay of scandalous autofictional texts and their writer’s medially divulged performances is exemplarily represented by French author Christine Angot. In the aftermath of the publication of *L’Inceste* (1999), an autofictional novel dealing with her sexual abuse by her father and her homosexual love life, Angot was not only invited to several television programmes for interviews but she also used her public appearances as well as other reactions to her scandalous novel (reviews, letters by readers etc.) as materials for her following novel *Quitter la ville* (2000).<sup>10</sup> This way, the scandal provoked by autofictional literature could be re-introduced into an autofictional text.

Given the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “scandal” as an “action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage”,<sup>11</sup> one might attribute a scandalous potential to Cuenca’s novel dealing with his wrongfully legal death. Furthermore, he did not confine the topic of his death to the literary discourse of autofiction but he also made a movie about it – *A morte de J. P. Cuenca*, released in 2015 – and performs the role of a “posthumous writer” outside of the world of literature and film-making in other media, such as newspaper interviews. This paper aims to elucidate Cuenca’s conception of a “posthumous autofictional discourse” by highlighting the notion of the “death of the author” and its implications for *Descobri*

<sup>9</sup> For literary “postures” see Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l’auteur* (Genève: Slatkine, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> For Christine Angot’s intermedial performance of authorship see Jutta Weiser, “Der Autor im Kulturbetrieb: Literarisches Self-Fashioning zwischen Selbstvermarktung und Vermarktungsreflexion (Christine Angot, Frédéric Beigbeder, Michel Houellebecq)”, *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 123 (2013): 225–50, especially 231–4.

<sup>11</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/scandal>, 04/03/2019.

*que estava morto*.<sup>12</sup> An examination of Cuenca's novel and its representation of authorship will be preceded by a short overview of the relation between authorship and death in 20<sup>th</sup> century literary theory and autofictional literature.

## 2 Authorship between life and death

When Roland Barthes announced the “death of the author” with his well-known essay “La mort de l’auteur” from 1968, he chose a concise metaphor for the substitution of intersubjectivity by intertextuality, as it had been proposed by his disciple Julia Kristeva one year before.<sup>13</sup> Barthes's notion of textuality denies that an author can have any authoritative effect on a text's semiotics and semantics. Instead, he describes the text as a polysemic sign system which does not refer to any unifying origin but multiplies the possibilities of its meaning. Moreover, the post-structuralist degradation of the author's authority as a creative subject must be considered within the frame of a prevalent tendency in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, philosophy and humanities: the disappearance of the subject.<sup>14</sup> Instead of a writing subject, post-structuralist theory only recognises the act of writing and the productivity of the text, thus illustrating an understanding of literature as a depersonalised, self-sufficient system. Barthes's and Kristeva's concept of an almost mechanical and automatic reproduction of texts was not only welcomed by representatives of post-structuralist and postmodern theory but it also became an important literary topic for several 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, for example Jorge Luis Borges,

<sup>12</sup> For recent studies on *Descobri que estava morto* see Ieda Magri, “Autocomposição em *Descobri que estava morto*, de J. P. Cuenca”, *Z Cultural. Revista do programa avançado de cultura contemporânea* 11 (2016): <http://revistazcultural.pacc.ufrj.br/resenha-autocomposicao-em-descobri-que-estava-morto-de-j-p-cuenca/>, 04/03/2019; Lucas Bandeira de Melo Carvalho, “O autor como fetiche: a autoficção em J. P. Cuenca”, *Z Cultural. Revista do programa avançado de cultura contemporânea* 12 (2017): <http://revistazcultural.pacc.ufrj.br/o-autor-como-fetiche-a-autoficcao-em-j-p-cuenca/>, 04/03/2019; Dejair Martins, “Em cena a autoficção da morte: J. P. Cuenca e seus híbridos monstros”, *Scripta Uniandrade* 16 (2018): 271–83.

<sup>13</sup> “[T]out texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte. A la place de la notion d'intersubjectivité s'installe celle d'intertextualité, et le langage poétique se lit, au moins, comme *double*.” Julia Kristeva, “Le mot, le dialogue, le roman”, *μ. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 82–112, here 85.

<sup>14</sup> For the disappearance of the subject as a topic in literature see, for example, Peter Bürger, *Das Verschwinden des Subjekts. Eine Geschichte der Subjektivität von Montaigne bis Barthes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998). For subjectivity in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and literature see Peter V. Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity. Between Modernity and Postmodernity* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

Italo Calvino or the members of the group Oulipo.<sup>15</sup> However, the power of the author as a creative subject was not only deconstructed by text theory: Michel Foucault's answer to the question "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" also rejected traditional biographical approaches to authorship, instead establishing different author functions.<sup>16</sup> Although he pretended not to share Barthes's radical death proclamation, Foucault's conception of authorship reduced the author to a construction of different discourses. Besides text theory and discourse analysis, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic emphasis on the symbolic function of language as a cause for the "decentralisation"<sup>17</sup> of the human subject represents a third post-structuralist approach to authorship undermining traditional concepts of literary subjectivity. When literary studies, especially those influenced by philological hermeneutics, started reclaiming the term of "authorship" in the 1990s, even opposing his metaphorical death sentence by announcing the "return" or "rebirth" of the author,<sup>18</sup> this re-evaluation of the author did not result in a shift-back to the biographical interpretations of authorship Barthes had criticised. Instead, current studies on literary authorship recognise the author as a textual construct and operate with a notion of writing subjects based upon the approaches of text theory, social theory,

<sup>15</sup> For the notion of the disappearance of man (subjects, authors) in literary texts of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century see Thomas Klinkert, "La disparition de l'homme dans les sciences humaines et dans la littérature de la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Épistémocritique* 7 (2010): <http://epistemocritique.org/la-disparition-de-lhomme-dans-les-sciences-humaines-et-dans-la-litterature-de-la-seconde-moitie-du-xxe-siecle/>, 04/03/2019.

<sup>16</sup> For a revision of Barthes's, Foucault's as well as other French contributions to the theory of authorship see Frederik Kiparski, "Contemporary French-Language Theories of Literary Authorship", in *Dealing with Authorship. Authors Between Texts, Editors and Public Discourses*, ed. by Sarah Burnautzki et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 2–20.

<sup>17</sup> "[C]'est en tant qu'il est engagé dans un jeu de symboles, dans un monde symbolique, que l'homme est un sujet décentré". Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller, vol. 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 63.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, the collective volume *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by William Irwin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002). Especially German language studies have contributed to the notion of the "return" or "rebirth of the author". See the volumes *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, ed. by Fotis Jannidis et al. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999); and *Autorschaft*, ed. by Heinrich Detering (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002).

discourse theory, cultural studies and media studies.<sup>19</sup> Although within the frame of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's "digital revolution" the hypertextual implications of a personalised authorship might evoke Barthes's conception of the "scripteur",<sup>20</sup> the public interest in authors as biographical subjects has not decreased, given the fact that today's writers do not only personally encounter their readers during public lectures but also communicate with them via new media. Therefore, contemporary research should consider historical and cultural dimensions whilst studying authorship, such as the approach by Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens and Marysa Demoor who propose a performative model of authorship, based on the historical alternation between predominantly "weak" and "strong" author concepts and related practices of writing, publication and reading.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas practices of performing authorship at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem to be hardly compatible with Barthes's declaration of death and the insignificant functions of the "scripteur", there are examples of literary texts effectively dealing with the death of their authors. Evidently, an author is unable to write about his or her death after having passed away. But this impossibility can be realized by autofiction: Autofiction represents a discourse model combining strategies of factual as well as fictional writing, but according to Doubrovsky's notion of the term, it is still possible to deliver a factual narration while writing down a fictional text, as fictionality in the sense of construction already determines the linguistic pattern of the facts narrated in the text.<sup>22</sup> While Doubrovsky insists on the factuality of his account, more recent representatives of autofiction have multiplied the possibilities of the genre by integrating fictitious elements such as, among others, the author-

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<sup>19</sup> For a collection of instructive contributions to contemporary approaches to literary authorship see *Dealing with Authorship. Authors Between Texts, Editors and Public Discourses*, ed. by Sarah Burnautzki et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> "[L]e scripteur moderne naît en même temps que son texte; il n'est d'aucune façon pourvu d'un être qui précéderait ou excéderait son écriture, il n'est en rien le sujet dont son livre serait le prédicat". Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur", *Le Bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 63–9, here 66.

<sup>21</sup> See Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, Marysa Demoor, "Authorship as Cultural Performance: New Perspectives in Authorship Studies", *ZAA. Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 60 (2012): 5–29.

<sup>22</sup> Claudia Gronemann has contributed important studies on Doubrovsky's notion of autofiction. See Claudia Gronemann, "L'autofiction ou le Moi dans la chaîne des signifiants: De la constitution littéraire du sujet autobiographique chez Serge Doubrovsky", in *Autobiographie revisited. Theorie und Praxis neuer autobiographischer Diskurse in der französischen, spani-*

persona's death. The discourse of the auto-obituary fits these characteristics, in as much as a still living person looks back on his or her life and writes about it from the point of view that this life has already ended. An exemplary collection of auto-obituaries was published in 1970 by German editor and journalist Karl Heinz Kramberg under the title *Vorletzte Worte. Schriftsteller schreiben ihren eigenen Nachruf*. The most famous of the German writers contributing to this collection was Uwe Johnson whose text *Dead Author's Identity in Doubt; Publishers Defiant* was even composed in English language. In this obituary written from the perspective of a *New York Times* correspondent, Johnson writes about his own death and reveals that the late "Uwe Johnson" had not been the real author of the works attributed to him until now, even challenging his identity by the assumption that "the entire East German part of Mr. Johnson's 'biography' has been fabricated and that he has been engaged in espionage activities under the cover of a leisured novelist".<sup>23</sup> This short text, published two years after Barthes's "La mort de l'auteur", represents a very interesting reflection on the interrelations of authorship, life and death: Though it is the act of writing that endows an author with life, the eventual appearance of the author is only provided by his death.<sup>24</sup> Forty years later, Michel Houellebecq has contributed another interesting autofictional version of the author's death with his novel *La Carte et le Territoire* (2010). Jed Martin, the novel's protagonist, is an artist who intends to prepare a portrait of the famous author "Michel Houellebecq". The two men meet several times, even become friends, but over the course of the novel, "Houellebecq" is murdered by a fanatic surgeon who wants to possess the writer's portrait. Although Houellebecq successfully depicts himself in his novel and even stages the brutal assassination of his fictional alter ego, the autofictional strategies of *La Carte et le Territoire* do not aim at an autofictional self-exploration in terms of Doubrovsky but

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*schen und lateinamerikanischen Literatur*, ed. by Alfonso de Toro and Claudia Gronemann (Hildesheim: Olms, 2004), 153–78; and "Autofiction", in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction. Volume 1: Theory and Concepts of Autobiography/Autofiction*, ed. by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 241–6.

<sup>23</sup> Uwe Johnson, "Dead Author's Identity in Doubt; Publishers Defiant", in *Vorletzte Worte. Schriftsteller schreiben ihren eigenen Nachruf*, ed. by Karl Heinz Kramberg (Frankfurt am Main: Bärmeier & Nikel, 1970), 116–24, here 124.

<sup>24</sup> For an interpretation of Johnson's auto-obituary see Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Dead Author's Identity in Doubt; Publishers Defiant. Zu Uwe Johnsons Selbstnachruf", in *Usbekisch-deutsche Studien III. Sprache – Literatur – Kultur – Didaktik*, Vol. 1, ed. by Rudolf Suntrup and Kordula Schulze (Münster: LIT, 2010), 201–13.

rather elucidate the situation of artists as well as the relation between arts and mankind in a postmodern capitalist society.<sup>25</sup>

Before turning to João Paulo Cuenca's autofictional investigation of his death, it is worth to take a look at another Brazilian representative of autofictional literature writing about his death: Ricardo Lísias. After the autofictional novels *O céu dos suicidas* (2012), dealing with the suicide of a close friend, and *Divórcio* (2013), treating the collapse of his own marriage, Lísias started publishing the e-book-series *Delegado Tobias* in 2014.<sup>26</sup> The first part of *Delegado Tobias* has the subtitle *O assassinato do autor*, and the assassination investigated in this text is effectively the one of the author Ricardo Lísias. Moreover, the main suspect imprisoned for his murder is a man who also claims to be Ricardo Lísias. Being narrated in third person and composed of different text documents, such as dialogues, e-mails and juridical reports, the series *Delegado Tobias* was complemented by several social media contributions concerning the fictional death investigations published on Lísias' Facebook page. The satirical dimension of Lísias' efforts to undermine the borderline of fiction, autofiction and reality even increased when in September 2014 someone named Paulo Tobias, thus homonymous with the investigating police inspector in Lísias' e-book, allegedly contacted Lísias and his editors in order to reclaim his identity and to threaten them with a lawsuit. Lísias did not hesitate to publish Tobias' e-mails on his Facebook page as well as the announcement of counter-lawsuits to protect his e-book from being prohibited. When the quarrels spread from social media to press, Lísias managed to turn the conflict into a scandalous debate on the legality or illegality of fiction, hence performing an intermedial defence of his authorship. At this point, the author of *Delegado Tobias* did not stop but pursued his satire by investigating the family background of inspector Paulo Tobias and collected several juridical papers, newspaper articles, e-mails, WhatsApp conversations, letters and other documents in his small book *Inquérito policial: família Tobias* published by his editor in 2016. This huge satirical campaign at the threshold of fiction and reality was even adapted for stage in form of a play entitled *Vou, com meu advogado*,

<sup>25</sup> For an interpretation of autofictional discourse and self-representation in *La Carte et le Territoire* see Christine Ott, "Literatur und die Sehnsucht nach Realität. Autofiktion und Medienreflexion bei Michel Houellebecq, Walter Siti und Giulio Minghini", in *Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Kulturelle Formungen des postmodernen Subjekts*, ed. by Jutta Weiser et al. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 209–231, especially 223–31.

<sup>26</sup> For a study on Ricardo Lísias' autofiction see Ana Cláudia Munari, Taíssi Alessandra Cardoso da Silva, "O romance de Ricardo Lísias: janelas escancaradas para o sujeito hiper-moderno", *Letras de Hoje* 51 (2016): 491–500.

*depor sobre o delegado Tobias* (2016) and dealing with the difficulty of explaining fiction to representatives of jurisdiction.<sup>27</sup> The main character of this play, “Ricardo Lísias”, was performed by Ricardo Lísias himself.

### **3 *Descobri que estava morto*: a thanatographic itinerary from death to death**

The beginning of *Descobri que estava morto* is highly evocative of Luigi Pirandello’s novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904) whose protagonist has been erroneously declared dead and fails to build up a new identity, as he does not know anymore who he really is. After having aggressive conflicts with his neighbours, the young Brazilian writer “João Paulo Cuenca”<sup>28</sup> receives a phone call from a police inspector informing him that the department is in possession of legal documents certifying his death in 2008. During a subsequent meeting in the police department, “Cuenca” examines a death certificate as well as other protocols validating the decease of a person whose official data are based upon his own identity. This person died three years ago, on the 14th of July in 2008, in an occupied building under construction in Lapa, a borough of central Rio de Janeiro. An autopsy produced an abscess-forming pneumonia as cause of death, and a witness named Cristiane Paixão certified the dead body’s identity as “João Paulo Cuenca”. These documents which are also reprinted on the pages of the novel could only be revised after an examination of the corpse’s fingerprints which produced another man’s identity in the criminal databank. Although the investigations seem to be closed, the police inspector questions “Cuenca” on his activities during his alleged date of death and the relations to the woman who had identified the corpse. The young author does not know the mysterious witness, and the day of his putative death, he was not even in Brazil but participating in a lecture on the Italian translation of his novel *O dia Mastroianni* in the Libreria del Cinema in Rome. “Cuenca” is allowed to leave the police department without consequences after finally asking the inspector to provide a copy of his death certificate.

<sup>27</sup> For a survey of the play and a publication of its first pages see Ricardo Lísias, “Vou, com meu advogado, depor sobre o delegado Tobias [trecho]”, *Ensaia. Revista de dramaturgia, performance e escritas múltiplas* 2 (2016): <https://www.revistaensaia.com/tobias-lisias,04/03/2019>.

<sup>28</sup> In order to distinguish the real person João Paulo Cuenca from the protagonist and narrator of *Descobri que estava morto*, the name of the latter one will be put between quotation marks.

In the meantime, he is preparing a new novel also evoking autofictional discourse, for its narrator, similar to “Cuenca”, feels lost and distressed in his home city described as a dystopian Rio de Janeiro. By highlighting the brutal urbanistic transformations, gentrifications and unjust treatments of all citizens who stand in the way of the radical preparations for the Football World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016, the protagonist’s literary project represents a form of political criticism with reference to the urban protests and civil disturbances at the same time. Although he does not pursue the completion of the planned novel, the political dimension concerning Rio de Janeiro’s social problems is reflected into several passages of *Descobri que estava morto*, as for example when “Cuenca” attends a highly decadent party interrupted by the sounds of explosions and gun-fire coming from a nearby borough where the Military Police fight drug criminals. Tomás, the host of the party and an influential newspaper editor, encourages “Cuenca” to investigate the background of his alleged death. Together they visit the building where the dead body was found and they engage a private investigator, in order to find the woman who identified the wrong “Cuenca”. However, these investigations do not lead to preferable results, and as “Cuenca” gets more and more annoyed by Rio de Janeiro, the circles he frequents and his life in general, he leaves the country, participates in lectures and literary festivals all around the world and satisfies his increasing desire for an existential disappearance. Two years later, returning from an event in New York, “Cuenca” receives an e-mail from the private investigator asking him for a meeting. While visiting him in his office, the author is kidnapped and questioned by members of the military police. After this incident, “Cuenca” does not return home and decides to abandon his former life by staying incognito. He thereupon rents a flat in the building where he was said to have died and starts a radical form of isolation. One day, during a walk, he gets involved in a violent riot and is brutally assaulted by municipal guards. A mysterious woman secretly brings him out of the hospital in order to nurse him in her home which is located exactly in the same building where the corpse of the man originally mistaken for being “Cuenca” had been discovered. Subsequently, the manuscript of the novel suddenly breaks up and is supplemented by a “note of an editor” written in an ostentatiously academic style and informing the readers about the

death of “João Paulo Cuenca” in 2015.<sup>29</sup> The paratextual announcement of the writer’s death can be considered to be the clearest evidence for a classification of the novel as fiction because it is evident that João Paulo Cuenca, the author of *Descobri que estava morto*, has not died in 2015 but is still alive. However, the structure of the book beginning with “Cuenca’s” mistaken decease and concluding with his actual decease discloses the novel as a literary exploration of death within the frame of autofictional discourse. The protagonist’s awareness of his growing disinterest in life is provoked by the confrontation with the possibility of being dead, so that the narration represents a progressive approach to death which permits to replace the autobiographic dimension with a thanatographic dimension.

Reading *Descobri que estava morto* as an autofictional thanatography requires examining the symbolic death of “João Paulo Cuenca”, especially with respect to his role as an author. In fact, the protagonist’s profession as a writer is far away from pursuing the process of writing at all. Apart from a single chapter of a planned novel, “Cuenca” does not embody authorship by writing but only by performing it:

Ser um escritor me ocupava tanto tempo que já não podia escrever mais nada – o texto tinha sido substituído pelo personagem no palco de alguns festivais. [...] o script da performance também era sempre o mesmo: nem-tão-jovem-autor cuidadosamente despenteado, em eterna crise conjugal, desejoso de abandonar a cidade de origem, do tipo que viaja muito e nutre paixões violentas por coisa alguma. Tentava interpretar o papel do escritor, já que eu mesmo não estava lá.<sup>30</sup>

Assuming that the literary text is replaced by the person originally designated to write it, the author is a mere performer of the discourse attached to his profession and the script he follows to incarnate his role becomes the substitute of literature. Instead of disappearing and losing his personality through the act of writing, as in “La mort de l’auteur”, the author in Cuenca’s novel rather contradicts Barthes’s assumptions because the only thing that matters for his literary public is the performance of a certain “posture” attributed to the life

<sup>29</sup> It should be indicated that the various editions of *Descobri que estava morto* differ from each other with respect to this supplementary note. In our Portuguese edition from 2015, it is introduced as a “Nota do editor”: see João Paulo Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto* (Alfarrige: Caminho, 2015), 217–20. In contrast, the postface in the Brazilian edition from 2016 is attributed to Maria da Glória Prado identified as a fictitious critic who also dates Cuenca’s death in the edition’s publication year 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 133 and 137.

of a writer. Quite obviously, this emphasis on the importance of a writer's self-exposure can be read as a parody aiming at the requirements of a literary market authors have to comply with by becoming public entertainers in order to meet economic expectations. In this respect, the narrator frankly admits: "Eu ganhava mais dinheiro falando sobre meus livros em eventos literários pelo país do que com a publicação deles."<sup>31</sup> The cultural scene "Cuenca" frequents in *Descobri que estava morto* is portrayed as superficial, capitalist and unable to understand his artistic aspirations as a writer. Thus, "Cuenca's" scarce attempts of literary production are always evaluated with regard to their economic potential, for example when his editor recommends to him to write less *nouveau roman* and more narrative,<sup>32</sup> or when his fragments for a dystopian novel about Rio de Janeiro's social crisis are not taken seriously. Even "Cuenca's" mention of the death notification with his name on it leads to a discussion with his friend Tomás about how to transform this mysterious incident into a successful outcome. Therefore, he reminds "Cuenca" that:

– Para um escritor é sempre bom morrer.

E me deu um abraço em armistício. Começamos a listar alguns escritores brasileiros mortos precocemente [...]. Nesse contexto, os que chegaram aos 56, como Clarice Lispector, Lúcio Cardoso e José Lins do Rego eram realmente bastante idosos. Tomás gargalhou: Mas pelo menos esses aí deixaram obra, né? Você morreu sem ter escrito porra nenhuma que prestasse!<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, the two friends allude to the myth of the dead author also evoked by Vila-Matas in his obituary. However, Tomás, in his role as the most influential newspaper editor in the city, already has plans how to proceed with the extraordinary fate of his friend's mistaken decease:

[M]eu amigo começou a falar do meu falecimento na Lapa. Aquilo daria uma bela reportagem, ele faria questão de acompanhar pessoalmente a história e quem sabe até contratar um detetive para apurar como o meu nome foi parar na etiqueta presa no dedão de um defunto no Instituto Médico-Legal – de fato, queria justamente abrir o texto com essa imagem: a gaveta do necrotério com o meu nome.

<sup>31</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 145.

<sup>32</sup> "Acho que o mercado já sabe que você escreve bem esses livros de literatura contemporânea e certa crítica te reconhece. Mas no Brasil você só vende uns 3 mil livros. Ou 5 mil, no máximo. Por que dessa vez algo menos *nouveau roman* e mais narrativa? Cá entre nós, a editora está pronta pra investir em distribuição e marketing se você vier com um livro que tenha enredo dessa vez...". Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 152.

<sup>33</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 100–1.

– E talvez depois até um filme. Um documentário com você investigando a história da sua própria morte.

Capitalizar em cima de uma história dessas seria de um mau gosto tremendo, mas julguei que o entusiasmo e o espírito prático de Tomás poderiam me ajudar a investigar a história.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, the two friends' motivations for the investigation of the erroneous event of death must be distinguished from each other. Tomás intends to make profit from it by providing a documental report or a scoop about the incident, thus his plans represent the journalistic equivalent to the autofictional novel itself.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the protagonist's interest for the investigation of his mistaken death and identity theft goes beyond the solution of a criminal case.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, several passages of *Descobri que estava morto* are aligned with the discourse of detective novels but in this regard, it can be related to a novel such as Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985).<sup>37</sup> Similar to the fate of Auster's protagonist, the writer Daniel Quinn, who is mistaken for the alleged investigator Paul Auster, "Cuenca's" investigation of a crime leads to the scrutiny and auto-deconstruction of his identity. Whilst pursuing the detections of a case of death that was registered as his own decease, the profoundly dissatisfied writer "Cuenca" reaches a new level of his identity crisis and an increase of his personal aspirations towards disappearance:

Era algo além das palavras, o que me faltava. Se nos meus planos de fuga e desterro eu sempre quis ser outro em outro lugar, agora tinha conquistado uma prova material desse alheamento: um cadáver com o meu nome. A partir

<sup>34</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 110–11.

<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Tomás's journalistic plans do not only allude to *Descobri que estava morto* but his suggestion of turning a documentary film about Cuenca's death also has an artistic counterpart: in 2015, Cuenca adapted his novel into the movie *A morte de J. P. Cuenca*. For a trailer see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxDOW-32XDc>, 04/03/2019.

<sup>36</sup> One could even deduce that "Cuenca's" preoccupation with death becomes a sort of obsession for him. He realises that the crime of his identity theft could prove beneficial to him – not financially, as Tomás suggested, but existentially: "eu então aprendia a desfrutar ainda sem entender o pesadelo daquela história: o fato de que o destino tivesse realizado a minha tão sonhada fuga, o meu sonho de desapareição, sem que eu sáisse do lugar. Aquela morte era só para mim." Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 136.

<sup>37</sup> For Auster's relation to the detective genre see Alison Russell, "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*," Paul Auster's Anti Detective Fiction", *Critique* 13 (1990): 71–84; as well as Michael Cook, *Narratives of Enclosure in Detective Fiction. The Locked Room Mystery* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13–151. The reference to Auster's novel has also been indicated by Lucas Bandeira de Melo Carvalho, "O autor como fetiche".

disso, uma sombra de dúvida passou a cobrir a realidade e não haveria viagem que me fizesse fugir disso.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to his previous performances of public entertainment and debauched lifestyle, he now lives a life of radical isolation concentrating on his will to disappear, thus evoking the writers in different novels by Enrique Vila-Matas.<sup>39</sup> The fourth and last part of the novel explicitly announces the protagonist's decline with its title "Queda"<sup>40</sup> ('decline'), its first paragraph ends with the remark "*Incipit vita nova*".<sup>41</sup> Though not marked as a citation, this Latin phrase is quoted from the introductory chapter of Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*,<sup>42</sup> a prosimetric text and autobiographically inspired narration dealing with Dante's love for Beatrice and her death. Given the self-reflexive character of *Descobri que estava morto* as a novel on authorship as well as on the relation between death and writing, the intertextual reference to Dante's "new life" can also be read as a return to Barthes: In *La Préparation du roman* (2003), a posthumously published collection of his lectures at the Collège de France, Barthes also introduces the term "vita nova" under reference to Dante in his lecture from 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1978.<sup>43</sup> According to the French critic, a special event in a writer's life – Barthes had his mother's decease in mind – can represent a turning point for his or her literary production: "pour qui a écrit, le champ de la *Vita Nuova*, ce ne peut être que l'écriture [...] : que la pratique d'écriture rompe d'avec les pratiques intellectuelles antécédentes ; que l'écri-

<sup>38</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 134.

<sup>39</sup> The decline of an author seeking for disappearance has already been mentioned in Vila-Matas' obituary notice and represents a recurring theme in novels such as *El mal de Montano* (2002) or *Doctor Pasavento* (2005). Especially *Doctor Pasavento* seems to be an important intertext for *Descobri que estava morto*, proven by the fact that Cuenca's autofictional protagonist also comments Robert Walser's microscripts which have a significant function in Vila-Matas' novel.

<sup>40</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 175.

<sup>41</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 177.

<sup>42</sup> "In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere, si trova una rubrica la quale dice: *Incipit vita nova*. Sotto la quale rubrica io trovo scritte le parole le quali è mio intendimento d'assemblare in questo libello, e se non tutte, almeno la loro sentenzaia." Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, a cura di Lodovico Magugliani (Milano: Rizzoli, 2002), 7.

<sup>43</sup> For an approach to Barthes's *Préparation du roman* see Guido Mattia Gallerani, *Roland Barthes e la tentazione del romanzo* (Milano: Morellini, 2013); for Barthes's notion of "vita nova" see Jean-Pierre Martin, "Barthes et la « Vita Nova »", *Poétique* 156 (2008): 495–508.

ture se détache de la *gestion* du mouvement passé”.<sup>44</sup> According to Barthes’s conjecture, Dante was 35 years old when his “vita nova” began, and it should not be regarded as a mere coincidence that the protagonist of *Descobri que estava morto* has the same age. But the beginning of “Cuenca’s” “new life” does not result in the advance of a new book project. His “vita nova” corresponds to a “work of art”<sup>45</sup> inasmuch as “Cuenca’s” new way of living represents a performance fundamentally opposed to his previous actions as a public entertainer for media and literary festivals. Having left behind all personal ties and having reached a state of radical self-isolation, he seeks to embody the art he could not produce whilst working as an author. Thus, his “new life” can be interpreted as an allusion to the so-called “writers of the No” Aaron Hillyer has described as “authors who, having lost all hope of an expressible, totality of words that signify wholly, eternally, and unequivocally, and of an accessible tradition, decide instead to build their work from a standpoint of extreme negativity, while still chancing that the literary word’s potential is not yet consumed”.<sup>46</sup>

Inspired by novels, such as Xavier de Maistre’s *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794) or Guido Morselli’s *Dissipatio H. G.* (1977), and enjoying his absolute concentration on presence,<sup>47</sup> “Cuenca” is temporarily occupied with his performance of a disappearing subject and a representative of negativity. One day, he accidentally gets involved in a street riot where he is brutally attacked by municipal guards and perilously injured. Written in a rather hallucinatory

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<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman, I et II. Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980)*, texte établi, annoté et présenté par Nathalie Léger (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2003), 29.

<sup>45</sup> The transformation of an author into a work of art can be illustrated with another reference to Barthes’s lectures. Regarding Maurice Blanchot and the topic of the writing subject, he states: “Il y a une dialectique propre à la littérature (et je crois qu’elle est d’avenir) qui fait que le sujet peut être livré comme une création d’art ; l’art peut se mettre dans la fabrication même de l’individu ; l’homme s’oppose moins à l’œuvre qu’il fait de lui-même une œuvre.” Barthes, *La Préparation du roman*, 229.

<sup>46</sup> Aaron Hillyer’s study focuses on writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben and Vila-Matas who certainly influenced Cuenca. See Aaron Hillyer, *The Disappearance of Literature. Blanchot, Agamben, and the Writers of the No* (New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), here 1.

<sup>47</sup> “O presente não era mais um ponto de transição do passado para o futuro e tampouco um espaço de recriação desse passado e desse futuro: ele era uma repetição infinita de si mesmo sem qualquer propósito, um entre-agoras que se espalhava. [...] Viver o presente: todas as lembranças descartáveis, a memória um artefato inútil.” Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 198.

language, the last pages of *Descobri que estava morto* deal with the protagonist's hospitalisation where a female accomplice saves him from police interrogations by secretly bringing him out of the clinic back to Lapa. The woman's identity is not revealed but the agonizing narrator addresses her several times before the manuscript of his narration breaks up. The break-up of the novel's manuscript suggests "Cuenca's" presumable death in the same building where his homonymous double once had died. Hence, the final part of *Descobri que estava morto* completes "Cuenca's" thanatographic itinerary, as he attains the state of death official bureaucracy had falsely granted to another person. The promise he had previously made to himself now has come true: "Aquela morte era só para mim."<sup>48</sup>

#### 4 Posthumous autofiction and the re-appropriation of an author's autonomy

With regard to the abrupt end of the narration which leaves out the moment of death, Cuenca seems to confirm the reaction of Cervantes' autobiographical picaresque writer Ginés de Pasamonte when asked by Don Quijote about the termination of his book: "¿Cómo puede estar acabado [el libro], si aún no está acabada mi vida?"<sup>49</sup> At first glance, the omission of the author's death description might appear less provocative and scandalous than, for instance, Houellebecq's autofictional assassination in *La Carte et le Territoire*, because it is the voice of an "editor" in the paratextual supplement who proclaims "Cuenca's" death:

Neste seu último livro ele [J. P. Cuenca] é um personagem literário, narrador da própria história, é um tipo real que rouba sua identidade e morre num prédio ocupado na Lapa – e que por isso se torna ficcional – e, por último, é o escritor que deixa um romance inacabado. Os três são personagens de ficção e personagens reais ao mesmo tempo. E os três estão mortos.<sup>50</sup>

Distinguishing three different "Cuencas" who are said to be both fictional and real characters, the "editor" refers to the autofictional pact without mentioning it explicitly. The whole supplement is composed as a combination of an obituary and an academic paper reviewing the novel. Readers are not only

<sup>48</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. by Francisco Rico (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg / Círculo de lectores 2004), 266. For the different relations between writing and death in *Don Quijote* see Francisco Layna Ranz, "‘Todo es morir, y acabóse la obra’. Las muertes de Don Quijote", *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 30 (2010): 57–82.

<sup>50</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 217.

informed about “João Paulo Cuenca’s” decease but about subsequent discussions and speculations about the scandal: “*A discreta – para não dizer inexistente – crônica policial sobre sua morte, a controversa repercussão nos meios culturais, a suspeita de assassinato, a conclusão do inquérito policial de que tenha se tratado de um suicídio, tudo isso faz parte de um objeto que ultrapassa os méritos do livro.*”<sup>51</sup> The putative aftermath of Cuenca’s death or alleged suicide in media and public discourse are even said to outperform the merits of his book – an assertion inevitably evocative of “Cuenca’s” public performances of authorship during life time. As an obituary and review of *Descobri que estava morto*, the “Nota do editor” implements the “myth of the dead author” discussed by “Cuenca” and Tomás as an excellent strategy for a writer’s success. Furthermore, the supplementary note revisits notions and topics of 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary cultural and literary studies to explain the value of *Descobri que estava morto*. Besides the allusion to autofictional discourse right at the beginning, the “editor” comes up with various terms suitable for an interpretation of the novel: The fragmentation and deconstruction of the unified subject, the writer as a simulacrum, the deauthorisation and end of literature, the coincidence of life and literary creation, the exhibitionist fetish of contemporary society as well as Barthes’s proclamation of the author’s death are all enlisted as possible reference points for a reading of Cuenca’s novel.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the intervention of a fictional editor stepping in after the break-up of a book’s manuscript and trying to authenticate the narrated events represents a very common operation in the history of romance literature, most prominently implemented by Cervantes for his parody of aesthetic illusion and performances of authorship in *Don Quijote*. Similar to the narrators, pseudo-authors and pseudo-editors in Cervantes’ novel,<sup>53</sup> the editor of the supplementary note to *Descobri que estava morto* is a voice within the frame of Cuenca’s autofictional discourse. Cer-

<sup>51</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 218.

<sup>52</sup> See Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 217–20.

<sup>53</sup> For the parodic relation of the narrative voices and pseudo-authors in *Don Quijote* see the chapter “Narrators, authors, pseudo-authors, presences” in James A. Parr, *Don Quixote. A Touchstone for Literary Criticism* (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2005), 15–31. Besides, it is also possible to point at other parallels between Cuenca’s and Cervantes’ novels: In the first part of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, the Spanish hidalgo is still preoccupied with verifying the world of fiction he knows from chivalric romances, whereas in the second part, he has already become the protagonist of a book and takes pains to distinguish himself from the adventures ascribed to him by an apocryphal author known as Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. Such as Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* aims to prove the falsehood of Avellaneda’s apocryphal hero, “Cuenca” seeks to regain the death he had been deprived of.

tainly, there is no doubt that the editor's observations regarding the topics of Cuenca's novel represent a plausible interpretation. But in the same way he or she provides a persuasive academic reading of *Descobri que estava morto*, his or her claim that Cuenca died in 2015 is as far away from truth as Vila-Matas's obituary. This ambiguity resulting from the combination of serious statements and untruthful assertions generate a parodic dimension close to the poetics of postmodernist literature studied by Linda Hutcheon.<sup>54</sup>

With regard to elements of social criticism in Cuenca's novel, for instance the repressive acts of the Public Prosecutor's Office, corruption, gentrification or favela policies, Bandeira de Melho Carvalho discerns a "discourse of the dispossessed".<sup>55</sup> There are no doubts about the seriousness of political and social criticism in *Descobri que estava morto*. However, the aspect of dispossession should also be considered for a reading of *Descobri que estava morto* as a self-conscious novel about authorship. For several reasons, "Cuenca" is a victim of dispossession: Official bureaucracy legally certified his decease after the theft of his identity, his publishers dissuade him from his role as an author of books and convert him into a public performer on literary festivals, Tomás intends to make money from his friend's wrongful death notification, and military police officers compel him to give up his investigations. The supplementary note effectively concludes this process because at the end of *Descobri que estava morto*, even the voice of the narrating protagonist has disappeared and is substituted by the "editor's" voice announcing "Cuenca's" death and the police's declaration to treat it as a suicide. "Cuenca's" progressive loss of autonomy and his death evoke the situation of the artists in Houellebecq's *La Carte et le Territoire*. But it would be short-sighted to come to the conclusion that *Descobri que estava morto* represents a warning about the weakened role of authors in contemporary culture, such as the "editor" suggests when explaining "Cuenca's" objectives as "*despedaçar a si mesmo junto a imagem luminosa dos escritores contemporâneos e, no fim, levar sua autodemolição ao limite, como um mensageiro do futuro que entrega a si mesmo a própria sentença de morte*".<sup>56</sup> Given

<sup>54</sup> For the poetics of postmodernist parody see Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 22–36; and "The Politics of Postmodern Parody" in *Intertextuality*, ed. by Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 225–36.

<sup>55</sup> "O romance nos diz o tempo todo que esse escritor – consciente da inutilidade da literatura, da futilidade de seu posicionamento político e de como ele enquanto escritor também se aproveita dos problemas alheios – nutre um desejo perverso por conhecer outro social, ou, em outras palavras, por ter a autoridade do discurso do despossuído." Lucas Bandeira de Melo Carvalho, "O autor como fetiche".

<sup>56</sup> Cuenca, *Descobri que estava morto*, 220.

the novel's quality as a postmodernist parody, it is rather likely to emphasise its playful and subversive character which should not be limited to the frame of the literary text. After the publication of *Descobri que estava morto*, Cuenca started converting his autofictional role as a dead writer for a performance of "posthumous authorship" in public. Consequently, he identified himself as a "posthumous writer" in an interview with an Argentine newspaper:

La novela se convierte en una plataforma permeable que me hace ser un fantasma y un personaje. Esa estrategia ficcional atraviesa el libro. Es un libro un poco raro si lo comparo con mis otras novelas. O con las entrevistas que daba antes de estar muerto, antes de convertirme en un personaje y en un personaje fallecido, en un escritor póstumo. Ese hecho es para mí clave en la lectura de mi libro. Un libro que no se cierra en sí mismo porque la experiencia sigue con 'A morte de J. P. Cuenca', la película que hice a partir de la historia, y sigue con un caso policial que queda abierto. ¿Cómo vivo como fantasma? Vivo una vida ficcionalizada. Atravesé una frontera, un portal, que me convirtió quizá para siempre en un personaje de novela.<sup>57</sup>

Adopting the "posture" of a "posthumous author", Cuenca has succeeded in making use of his fate within autofictional discourse. After fictionalising his identity for *Descobri que estava morto*, he claims to have become a fictional personality in reality. Whereas publishers, media and readers required public performances of his autofictional protagonist, Cuenca undermines this requirement by confronting them with his self-fashioning as a "dead author" enjoying his life after death. Instead of a radicalisation of Barthes's "La mort de l'auteur", as the "editor" in the novel's supplementary note deduces, *Descobri que estava morto*, its subsequent movie adaptation *A morte de J. P. Cuenca* and Cuenca's performance of a "posthumous writer" rather represent a self-conscious concept of authorship which repels any tendencies contesting the autonomous status of writers. Therefore, "Cuenca's" thanatographic itinerary in *Descobri que estava morto* should be read as a transition to the plea for the autonomy of authorship. In this regard, Barthes's proclamation of the author's disappearance within the text is objected to with the dead author's stepping out of the autofictional text in order to celebrate his symbolical rebirth.

## 5 Conclusion

The main topic of *Descobri que estava morto* is the death of the author, both on the level of the novel's plot and on a symbolical or meta-literary level. Both

<sup>57</sup> "La rara experiencia de escribir como muerto", <https://www.ambito.com/la-rara-experiencia-escribir-como-muerto-n3989711,04/03/2019>.

levels are interrelated, as “Cuenca’s” discovery of his legal death stimulates his existential dissatisfaction and decline, leading him from the profession of a writer without literary production into the state of a disappearing subject incarnating negativity. The end of his narration and the “editor’s” announcement of the writer’s death suggest “Cuenca’s” eventual absence as well as the symbolical end of authorship. This impression is backed up by the “editor’s” references to post-structuralist theories and postmodernist conceptions on the decline of subjectivity. Nevertheless, it has to be borne in mind that all statements made in *Descobri que estava morto* are part of the novel’s autofictional discourse and thus have to be attributed to the empirical author’s self-fashioning. The representation of an author’s collapsing authority and autonomy, his symbolical death, belong to a performative, scandalous as well as subversive strategy Cuenca implements in order to claim his power in the literary field. After the novel’s publication, he started performing as a “posthumous writer” in public, thus parodying the performances imposed on his autofictional equivalent. By adapting the autofictional game of authorship between life and death to his real-life performances, and by proceeding his playful self-fashioning with the production of a cinematic version of his novel, Cuenca managed to exhibit with brio the autonomy of authorship, after letting “himself” die in *Descobri que estava morto* for the sake of his “resurrection”. If the “history of authorship could [...] be written as the history of its affirmed or contested validity and legitimacy,”<sup>58</sup> Cuenca made a clear statement for its legitimate power by using autofictional discourse as an act of authorial autopoiesis. In this respect, the discourse of “posthumous autofiction” has an unmistakable message: “The Author Is Dead; Long Live the Author!”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Berensmeyer, Buelens, Demoor, “Authorship as Cultural Performance”, 22.

<sup>59</sup> This slogan has been quoted in a multitude of studies on literary authorship. See, for instance, Kiparski, “Contemporary French-Language Theories On Literary Authorship”, 2.