

## A PRINTER'S DESTINY

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*Image by the author.*

When strolling through Berlin, a place I try to call my new home, I take pictures of the city's landscape, of funny graffiti, of winter's sunlight illuminating the streets on these few hours of daylight. On one such occasion, I encountered this lonely printer in front of an entrance door and I instantly fell in love with it – with both the printer and the picture I took of it, a rather strange composition of things with the printer arising as the protagonist of its own story as it unfolds before my eyes.

I sense an odd kind of beauty in this picture, a picture that is so much more to me than just a picture of a printer in front of a door. It makes me feel the beauty and sense the brokenness of our world, a brokenness that no one is going to fix – just as no one is going to fix you, dear printer.

What are you waiting for, printer? Who left you outside all alone, on a cold winter's day?

They say you ain't got agency, but I can see your biography unfolding in front of me. *I see you.*

When I look at you embedded in this picture, I think about how you were born, dear printer, I think about the process of your design and your assembling. You've travelled a lot and seen a lot... the womb of the factory where you were assembled, together with your brothers and sisters, where raw materials from different places – each with a particular story – were brought together, cold machines and warm

human hands molding, forging you, giving you form and abilities; your partly smooth, partly stubborn materiality acting on its own, shaping the hands that shape you. You've been clothed with wrapping paper and laid down on cushioning, you've been moved into trunks of transportation vehicles, and unloaded at places you'd never seen before. You were heavy in the trucks, taking up space proudly – for there you were, a new thing-in-the-world.

Perhaps you were even exhibited at a store, but probably you were kept inside your box, labeled with a name that was given to you – awaiting your destiny. Your destiny as an object that would be owned and used by those who wrongfully claim themselves to be the only subjects of this world. From the moment you were born you were owned, you were born into ownership, and now you were traded, chosen by who would become your human companion, based on qualities that were inscribed into your flesh, on product name and the so impersonal serial number. You were one out of many identical, yet each in its own right, each a thing-in-the-world. You were traded for money, carried away, your weight and the bulkiness of your packaging challenging your new owner's strength. You were unpacked, accommodated in your new home, given a space of your own that would meet your necessities – your physicality, your weight, and the actions you were designed to perform.

Printer, where is your agency?

You were being docked to power, fed with ink in black and blue and yellow and magenta, and fed with paper some of which you would destroy by imprinting erroneously. You were introduced to other devices you'd develop an interdependence with, relationships of their own, computers, tablets, smartphones that sent you the information of what to print and that received information passed on by you. Sometimes you would cooperate with them and with the human acting through them, other times, however, not so much. Most of the time, you were asleep, awakened only from time to time, some blinking lights and muffled sounds as you were executing orders – or not. I'm sure you were even being yelled at when you wouldn't cooperate with the wishes of your human companion, I'm sure your rebelliousness made your owners upset more than just once, but your communication was broken, and no one really knew you, acting on your own rules, rules inscribed deeply into your flesh.

They say you ain't got agency, but I know better. You and me, we know better.

Your materiality is where I encounter you, and your materiality is where your agency lies as you afford for other subjects to act upon your own actions. You raised hopes and expectations; your surface provided tactile experiences, your command buttons required your human companions to act in particular ways. Your beeping and rattling had caused sighs of relief – *you are starting to print, after all!* – or had annoyed or upset the humans – *again you're out of paper, but won't you stop the beeping already?*

Your agency is about printing, scanning, creating copies that enable humans to do other things with, things that exceed your own understanding of the world. But your agency is also about affecting others as you do what you do, as you are just there. Your agency is even about *not* to function in the expected ways, as you cause delays, stress, a wide range of emotions by your acts and by your refusal to act.

They say you ain't got agency, but you do.

As I stand there looking at you, you seem a rather ordinary printer, even mediocre, not one of these high-tech devices. Probably you'd been the cheapest option, or one of those on the cheaper side. *I see you* in all your modesty, I see how you have been denied of your subjectivity and your agency for all your life, all your existence.

Oh dear printer, ain't nobody gonna fix you?

No, your destiny's already been written. The moment you were abandoned, left alone, the moment you transgressed the boundaries of your ownership, you were already destined to be what you are now – garbage. Too expensive it would be to fix you, they say. Too expensive, indeed. From shiny shop windows and display platforms to scrap heaps, from being carefully covered with wrapping paper and cushioning to being left naked in the street, open to the four winds. You've long been replaced by something shinier, something more capable, some other object whose promises are more promising than yours could ever be.

But it's not the end of your story. You'll remain on earth much longer, probably longer than those people who had assembled you together, those who carried and drove you around, or those who made use of your ability to create a print.

Who will care for you now, dear printer?

I don't know where you are going next, what's going to happen to you. I don't know how you are going to cease to exist, when the unknown materials that compose your integrity will fall apart.

But dear printer, you make me wonder: Why is it that I will only ever see your kinds in the stages of life of function and use? Why am I bewildered by your presence here, where you are thrown out of your usefulness to the proclaimed subjects of this world, in the transitional phase before being deported to the great unknown? How come that it is so far away from me that you are being conceived, produced, and so far away from my own place on the Earth that you will be decaying at last, and what can that tell me about the world we live in?

I will think about these questions in honor of your memory, dear printer, I promise you, while you will go on with your journey. Yet me, I'm here to stay. I only see you now, as you hold together this image for me, the middle between the world as it falls apart and the world as it is reassembled together, just as it is reassembling together constantly, a broken and fragile world.

Me, I'm just a passenger; our paths won't become entangled. I'm just passing by, without touching you, moving you, shaping your destiny, while you do touch me in a way deeper than one would think. You make me care for you, standing there, part of an assemblage of other random things, you make me see, not only your own agency, but the whole fragility of your existence, of all existence, even my own embodied existence.

Let me be part of your destiny, dear printer, in this ephemeral moment, before you move on, your materiality even bulkier than before for those who will have to carry you away as garbage. Who knows who you are going to meet, knowing hands to gut your innards, machines to crush your shell, fire, chemicals, toxic vapors, other broken machines. You will be treated less than an object, but still have this agency of your own, this agency inextricable from your materiality.

Right now, at this step of your journey, it is this materiality through which you act by taking up space on a sidewalk, you act by affecting other actors, like me. Others may be annoyed by your inadequate position; maybe you affect their narrow expectations of a nice street, or maybe you affect them by impeding their ability to pass by.

But me?

You made me feel beauty by contemplating you standing there as the protagonist of this picture. You evoked feelings of affection for you, made me feel lost in presence by expressing your story with this very materiality of yours, you made me think of what you're going to do next.

And you made me write this piece about material objects and agency.

*You act through me.*

*And shape this subjectivity I call my own in ways I won't ever understand.*

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