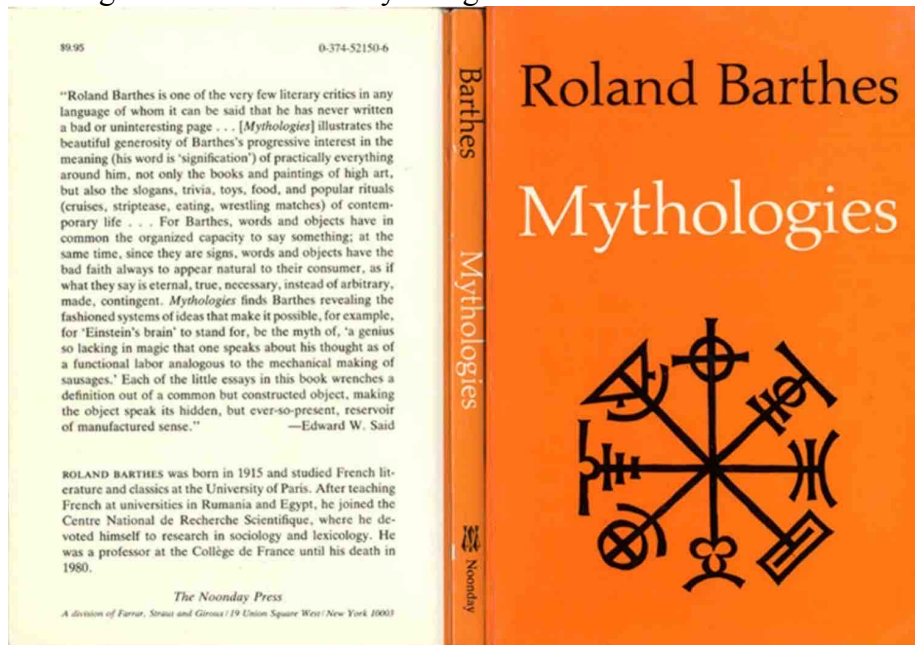


Reading Roland Barthes's Mythologies



According to Barthes, a mythologist is (not just an irreverent, cultural jester, but) an individual who recognizes a cultural myth, separates its components, analyzes their workings and, thereby, reveals a myth's distortions. In *Mythologies* Barthes spots myths in consumer culture--the presented meaning of a story in a newspaper, the manifest message of an ad. Barthes takes just a few pages to deconstruct the overt message of each of his myths by showing a deeper distortion: a latent meaning.

Barthes says that the attempt that *Le Figaro* makes at mythologizing the writer as worker only points all the more to the cultural belief, the mystification, the myth, that the writer is not like the reader at all, but is, in fact, a godhead. The newspaper is not demystifying the writer's divine qualities and bringing the writer down to the earthly plane as the overt message appears to be doing; the message is, in fact, performing the opposite task. Barthes writes, "By having holidays, [the writer] displays the sign of his being human; but the god remains, one is a writer as Louis XIV was king, even on the commode" (30).

Barthes's closing essay, in which he explains his approach, is far less entertaining. But his reiteration of the Saussurean linguistic split between signifier and signified and his graduating that model into his own diagrammatical explanation for myth is so modest, clear and concise it had me wondering if Barthes's hand *had*, in fact, been imbued with divinity.

In the end, the joy, humor and enthusiasm of Barthes's critical art fades, a myth pushed aside. He suddenly paints the mythologist in melancholy tones.

Barthes' world of wrestling, then, emerges as allegory in its purest, most elemental sense. Wrestling's landscape, drained of entity save the combatants, emerges as the opposite of mimesis. Here, time and causality recede into the background. For Barthes, wrestling, like biblical narrative, occurs on a horizon so blank, every gesture becomes a clear act of signification.

Our interpretation at these points of thematic juncture involves a movement into myth--as Barthes explains it--for we simultaneously generalize and impoverish the meaning of the action on the wrestling mat.

Wrestling, Barthes proposes, provides intense satisfaction for its audience, where for once there is "an ideal understanding of things; ...the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction" (29).

In *Mythologies*, Barthes, a theorist I previously (and less amiably) met during my Media and Rhetoric class, does a semiotic reading of different aspects of society in order to identify the ideological beliefs that support them. Thus "mythology" is mode of communication that signifies what supposedly goes without saying in society, the language that makes unrealistic "truths" seem natural. It doesn't sound entertaining, but it is.

Barthes concludes his preface with the declaration, "What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth." And boy is he sarcastic. And witty. And insightful. I found myself reading his little essays and scrawling "Yes!" in the margins (because "OMG! This guy is right on! Hahaha!" took too long to write).

The second part of the work 'Myth today' by which Barthes associates using the series of essays to generalize this theory of myth using semiological elements and ideologies driving to the birth of ephemeral forms yet everlasting myths. This is a highly recommended reading for whoever interested in exploring what it means to be a linguist, mythologist or a cultural anthropologist for that matter. And surely, this particular essay needs a lot of revisiting.

Myth As Stolen Language—makes interesting move from description of myth strictly in linguistic terms to characterizing Contemporary Poetry as antimythical system, which is in turn, of course, appropriated as {Contemporary-Poetry-as-antimythical}-as-myth.

Pg. 244: "Myth can reach everything, corrupt everything, and even the very act of refusing oneself to it."

Math as a "finished language which derives its very perfection from this acceptance of death". Quantitative-as-death.

Tautology reaches the same end: "Now, any refusal of language is a death. Tautology creates a dead, motionless world" (267).

Q: Can Myth be described in relation to the terms quantitative or qualitative?

A: "By reducing any quality to quantity, myth economizes intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply" (268).

"Contemporary Poetry is a regressive semiological system."

Compare "image-at-one's-disposal" (259) to the ready-to-hand object.

An interestingly cynical, if somewhat outdated in places, view of the world. Included with this collection of essays comes the explanation of the theory of *myths* as Barthes sees it. Myth is a second level construct somewhat akin to the idea that language comprises of letters, of meaning, and of their conjunction and coagulation into a concept in our mind. Myth takes the this concept, takes another meaning, and brings the two together to create a myth.

Barthes is a powerful observer and his writing is lean and sharp. Recommended for its ability to provoke thought and re-awaken curiosity. Its more crucial than ever these days, to think about what we see rather than just accept everything at face-value.

His long, intricate study ("no denunciation without its proper instrument of close analysis") helps parcel out what we're reading from the motivation of its having been written.

What remains, besides the capital enemy (the bourgeois Norm) is the necessary conjunction of these two gesture: no denunciation without its proper instrument of close analysis, no semiology which cannot ultimately be acknowledged as a semioclasm.

[Semiotics is the study of meaning-making, the philosophical theory of signs and symbols. This includes the study of signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication.]

... The emphatic truth of gesture in life's grander circumstances. - Baudelaire

The pure countenance is rendered utterly useless (ie, luxurious) by the aberrant angle from which it is shot... and if the Harcourt camera, privileged to capture this unearthly beauty, has had to take up its position in the most improbable zones of a rarified space - as if this countenance, floating between the stage's crude earth and the town's radiant sky, could be only momentarily ravished from its intemporal nature and then devoutly abandoned to its solitary and regal course; sometimes materially plunged earthward, sometimes ecstatically upraised, the actor's face seems to unite with his celestial home in an ascension without haste and without muscles, quite contrary to an onlooking humanity which, belonging to a different zoological class and capable of movement only by legwork (and not by face), must return to its residence on foot. (Walking is perhaps - mythologically - the most trivial, hence the

most human gesture. Every dream, every ideal image, every social preferment initially suppresses the legs, either by portrait or by automobile.)

The Harcourt iconography sublimates the actor's materiality and prolongs a necessarily trivial 'scene' (since it functions) by means of an inert and consequently ideal 'town.'

The Harcourt studio summons up a god, and thereby, for this bourgeois public that is both blasé and living on lies, everything is satisfied.

As a consequence, the Harcourt photograph is, for the young actor, an initiation rite, a guild diploma, his true professional *carte d'identité*. Is he properly enthroned if he has not yet encountered the sacred Harcourt Image? This rectangle which first reveals his ideal head, his intelligent, sensitive, or witty expression, depending on the role he offers to life, is the formal document by which the whole of society agrees to separate him from its own physical laws and assures him the perpetual revenue of a countenance which receives as a gift, on the day of this baptism, all the powers ordinarily denied, at least simultaneously, to ordinary flesh: a changeless splendor, a seduction pure of all wickedness, an intellectual power which is not the necessary accompaniment to the ordinary actor's art or beauty.

What proves the writer's marvelous singularity is that during famous vacations, which he fraternally shares with workmen and shop assistants, he never ceases, if not working, at least producing. One of them writes his memoirs, another corrects his proofs, a third is preparing his next book. And the one who does nothing confesses he is indulging some truly paradoxical behavior, an avant-garde exploit only a strong-minded individual can permit himself to acknowledge. We know from this last piece of braggadocio that it is entirely 'natural' for the writer always to write, in all situations. The writer is on vacation, but his Muse is wide awake, and gives birth nonstop.

The second advantage of this logorrhea... is that by its imperative character it passes quite naturally for the writer's very essence.

The truth behind these seasonally professed inadequacies of intelligence is the old obscurantist myth which holds that an idea is noxious if it is not controlled by 'common sense' and 'feeling': Knowledge is Evil, both grow on the same tree: culture is permitted, provided one periodically proclaims the vanity of its purposes and the limits of its power; ideal culture should be nothing but a sweet rhetorical effusion, the art of words to bear witness to a transient moistening of the soul.

Barthes's seminal work is an analysis of myth, from its creation and insertion in society to an in-depth study of how it pervades our culture (it is worth noting that he refers to myth in a contemporary way, unlike the stories of old seen stacked in bookshelves all around the globe).

In the first section (Mythologies), we are presented with essays covering quite an interesting array of topics, from wrestling to Einstein's brain to toys, which show us that we as readers can write about literally anything, provided that we develop our own creative way of looking at things (a very inspirational aspect of the book indeed). Barthes dissects 1950s French society in such a fashion that the essay's ideas remain relevant to this day. In a very basic way, he observes all of these subjects as a language, which brings me to the second part of the book:

In *Myth Today*, he goes one step further in his analysis by first introducing us to Semiology (Ferdinand de Saussure's study of signs developed in the 19th century) and then carrying his thoughts forward, even by coming up with a graph to illustrate the crux of the matter. Myths according to Barthes are nothing but a set of ideas that become universally accepted and/or understood according to a dominant ideal, which in turn can become immortal in the sense that they will always be able to "morph" into something different whilst retaining their significance (In Barthes's case this follows from a Bourgeois dominant principle/ideology, and we all have the tendency to accept them without questioning their origins or the existence of any hidden agenda behind them). There is no doubt that one may find this part of the book more politically oriented, though it is at the same time undeniable that it will also make the reader think more critically, which is one of the highlights of the book.

In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes undertakes a semiotic commentary of popular cultural objects well known in the French community such as steak and chips, wrestling, and even soap power and detergents; unearthing the symbolic value of these objects in relation to their claim of universality, at times finding that some objects retain significations

interrelated with the bourgeoisie and capitalist cultures. He resolves to call the cultural power of these objects 'myths'.

Barthes follows up on the school of semiotics established by [Ferdinand de Saussure](#) for whom the building blocks of semiotics are found in a dyadic model of: (1) the signified; 'the "something"' which is meant by the person who uses the sign' (Barthes 1967: 43); (2) the signifier; the mediator which is used to infer the signified; and together they constitute the sign. Therein, one can infer the signified upon interacting with the signifier. For example: in the act of gifting a lover a flower; flower is the signifier of passion, passion is the signified and together they form the sign intended in the communicative act of gifting a lover a flower. To Barthes, these relations constitute only the first-order semiotic system' Looking beyond into the interactions of signification hidden in our complex notions of culture and political identity, among other things, he loosely develops on the [work of Hjelmslev](#), Danish linguist, who finds that these relations constitute a part of a second-level semiotic system where the sign as whole is only a mere signifier; this second-level system forms a plane of expression where we interact with connotation, metalanguage and indeed, myth.

- Barthes often claimed to be fascinated by the meanings of the things that surround us in our everyday lives. If there is a certain amount of thematic continuity between the two 'parts' of *Mythologies* then it is here, in their shared interrogation of the meanings of the cultural artefacts and practices that surround us. Barthes often claimed that he wanted to challenge the 'innocence' and 'naturalness' of cultural texts and practices which were capable of producing all sorts of supplementary meanings, or connotations to use Barthes's preferred term. Although objects, gestures and practices have a certain utilitarian function, they are not resistant to the imposition of meaning. There is no such thing, to take but one example, as a car which is a purely functional object devoid of connotations and resistant to the imposition of meaning. A BMW and a Citroën 2CV share the same functional utility, they do essentially the same job but connote different things about their owners: thrusting, upwardly-mobile executive versus ecologically sound, right-on trendy. We can speak of cars then, as signs expressive of a number of connotations. It is these sorts of secondary meanings or connotations that Barthes is interested in uncovering in *Mythologies*. Barthes wants to stop taking things for granted, wants to bracket or suspend consideration of their function, and concentrate rather on what they mean and how they function as signs. In many respects what Barthes is doing is interrogating the obvious, taking a closer look at that which gets taken for granted, making explicit what remains implicit.
- Barthes is not claiming that the abbé Pierre cynically manipulated his public image, but is making the point, rather, that nothing can be exempted from meaning (see Barthes: 1975 p.90). Every single object or gesture is susceptible to the imposition of meaning, nothing is resistant to this process. This is especially the case when, like the abbé Pierre, one is subjected to the attention of the media. Barthes takes his argument one step further however. The media's stress on the abbé Pierre's devotion and good works - symbolized by his haircut! - diverts attention from any form of investigation of the causes of homelessness and poverty. Media representations of the abbé Pierre, claims Barthes, sanctify charity and mask out all references to the socio-economic causes of homelessness and urban poverty. What emerges in 'Iconographie de l'abbé Pierre' is a strategy that is repeated throughout *Mythologies*: Barthes begins by making explicit the meanings of apparently neutral objects and then moves on to consider the social and historical conditions they obscure.

Barthes often felt like an impostor, which might explain the endearing notes of self-deprecation that punctuate his writing. As the novelist Philippe Sollers writes in his enjoyably grouchy homage, *The Friendship of Roland Barthes*, "he didn't realize that what he had done was considerable."

There was always something incongruous about Barthes's ambition to write a novel. He made no secret of being bored by the great novels of the nineteenth century: "Has anyone ever read Proust, Balzac, *War and Peace*, word for word?" Although he had been a champion of the experimental "new novel" of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor in the 1950s, his best writing was inspired by photography, theater, painting, music, and, not least, consumer culture.

Barthes goes behind and under the image to uncover the unacknowledged realities of physical human limitations and of economic oppression.

While Barthes insists on the importance of the literal and seeing things as they are rather than as we would like them to be, his language often drifts off into the metaphorical and the abstract. A phrase like "the brutality of meats" reminds readers that birds must be slaughtered to produce glazed pheasants, but it's hard to know exactly how we

are to discover \"the abruptness of shellfish.\"

For Barthes, common sense is the enemy, a bourgeois defense against critical theory. Common sense is simplistic; theory is rich and complex.