

# Roland Barthes:

## *Mythologies* (1957)

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### Introduction

Roland Barthes is a key figure in international intellectual life. He is one of the most important intellectual figures to have emerged in postwar France and his writings continue to have an influence on critical debates today.

When he died in 1981, he left a body of major work but, as many of his friends and his admirers claimed, with still more important work to come. I can't possible hope to do justice to the diversity of his various writings here - I can only point you in the direction of Culler (1983), Moriarty (1991) and Rylance (1994) where you will find good accounts of his career - so I will plunge straightaway into a discussion of *Mythologies*, which is one of his earliest and most widely-read works. *Mythologies* is one of Barthes's most popular works because in it we see the intellectual as humourist, satirist, master stylist and debunker of the myths that surround us all in our daily lives.

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### What is *Mythologies* About?

*Mythologies* is a text which is not one but plural. It contains fifty-four (only twenty-eight in the Annette Lavers's English translation) short journalistic articles on a variety of subjects. These texts were written between 1954 and 1956 for the left-wing magazine *Les Lettres nouvelles* and very clearly belong to Barthes's 'période "journalistique"' (Calvet: 1973 p.37). They all have a brio and a punchy topicality typical of good journalism. Indeed, the fifty-four texts are best considered as opportunistic improvisations on relevant and up-to-the-minute issues rather than carefully considered theoretical essays. Because of their very topicality they provide the contemporary reader with a panorama of the events and trends that took place in the France of the 1950s. Although the texts are very much of and about their times, many still have an unsettling contemporary relevance to us today.

Although there are a number of articles about political figures, the majority of the fifty-four texts focus on various manifestations of mass culture, *la culture de masse*: films, advertising, newspapers and magazines, photographs, cars, children's toys, popular pastimes and the like. This broke new ground at the time. Barthes showed that it was possible to read the 'trivia' of everyday life as full of meanings.

*Mythologies*, however, includes not just the fifty-four journalistic pieces, but an important theoretical essay entitled 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' (Barthes: 1970 pp.193-247). 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' is a retrospectively imposed theoretical conspectus (an overall view, summary or survey) which is an important theoretical or methodological tract in its own right, but in no way central to an understanding and appreciation of the other texts in *Mythologies*. The fact that it is positioned after the journalistic articles is significant. This expressed not simply the chronological order in which they were written, but also how Barthes wished us to read the text as a whole. 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' was not intended to be seen as the *theory* underpinning the *practice* of the fifty-four articles which were more spontaneous and intuitive. What 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' does, however, is to make more explicit some of the concerns that underpin the fifty-four essays. There is, then, a certain amount of continuity between the two 'parts' of *Mythologies*.

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## Interrogating the Obvious

... ce qui m'a toujours préoccupé [...] c'est le problème de la signification des objets culturels. (Barthes: 1981 p.64)

Dans la vie quotidienne, j'éprouve pour tout ce que je vois et entends une sorte de curiosité, presque d'affection intellectuelle qui est de l'ordre du romanesque. (Barthes: 1981 p.192)

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.

A simple example of Barthes getting under the surface of things is the essay 'Iconographie de l'abbé Pierre' (Barthes: 1970 pp.54-6). The abbé Pierre was a Catholic priest who achieved a certain amount of media attention in the 1950s (and in the 1980s and 1990s too) for his work with the homeless in Paris. What interests Barthes is, perversely, the abbé Pierre's clothes and, in particular, his haircut. We would expect such a man to be indifferent to fashion and to consider a certain neutrality or 'État zéro' (Barthes: 1970 p.54) to be desirable. However, far from being neutral or innocent, the abbé Pierre's clothes and hairstyle send out all sorts of messages. The abbé Pierre's simple working-class 'canadienne' and austere hairstyle all connote the qualities of simplicity, religious devotion and self-sacrifice. His clothes and hairstyle make a fashion statement of sorts - as much, if not more, than a Lacoste polo shirt or an Armani suit - and are rich in connotations:

... la neutralité finit par fonctionner comme *signe* de la neutralité, ... La coupe zéro, elle affiche tout simplement le franciscanisme; conçue d'abord négativement pour ne

pas contrairier l'apparence de la saintetÈ, bien vite elle passe ++ un mode superlatif de signification, elle dÈguise l'abbÈ en saint FranÈois. (Barthes: 1970 p.54)

Barthes is not claiming that the abbÈ 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 abbÈ Pierre, one is subjected to the attention of the media. Barthes takes his argument one step further however. The media's stress on the abbÈ 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 abbÈ 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'abbÈ 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.

## Mass Culture, Myth and the Mythologist

Le dÈpart de cette rÈflexion Ètait le plus souvent un sentiment d'impatience devant le 'naturel' dont la presse, l'art, le sens commun affublent sans cesse une rÈalitÈ qui, pour Ìtre celle dans laquelle nous vivons, n'en est pas moins parfaitement historique: en un mot, je souffrais de voir ++ tout moment confondues dans le rÈcit de notre actualitÈ, *Nature et Histoire*, et je voulais ressaisir dans l'exposition dÈcorative de ce-qui-va-de-soi, l'abus idÈologique qui, ++ mon sens, s'y trouve cachÈ. (Barthes: 1970 p.9)

Ce que je n'aime pas dans l'Occident, c'est qu'il fabrique des signes et les refuse en mÌme temps. [...] de quel droit parlerais-je au nom de la vÈritÈ? Mais ++ battre en brÈche inlassablement la naturalitÈ du signe; Áa oui! (Barthes: 1981 p.95)

*Mythologies* is, superficially at least, a rather puzzling title for a book concerned with the meanings of the signs that surround us in our everyday lives. A myth, after all, is a story about superhuman beings of an earlier age, of ancient Egypt, Greece or Rome. But the word 'myth' can also mean a fictitious, unproven or illusory thing. This is closer to the sense that Barthes explores in *Mythologies*. Barthes is concerned to analyse the 'myths' circulating in contemporary society, the false representations and erroneous beliefs current in France of the postwar period. *Mythologies* is a work about the myths that circulate in everyday life which construct a world for us and our place in it:

La France tout entiÈre baigne dans cette idÈologie anonyme: notre presse, notre cinÈma, notre thÈtre, notre littÈrature de grand usage, nos cÈrÈmoniaux, notre Justice, notre diplomatie, nos conversations, le temps qu'il fait, le crime que l'on juge, le mariage auquel on s'Èmeut, la cuisine que l'on rÙve, le vÌtement que l'on porte, tout, dans notre vie quotidienne, est tributaire de la reprÈsentation que la bourgeoisie se fait et nous fait des rapports de l'homme et du monde. (Barthes: 1970 p.227)

What joins the journalistic articles and the theoretical essay is the conviction that what we accept as being 'natural' is in fact an illusory reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power obtaining in society. *Mythologies* - both the journalistic articles and the theoretical essay - is a study of the ways in which mass culture - a mass culture which Barthes sees as controlled by *la petite bourgeoisie* constructs this mythological reality and encourages conformity to its own values. This position informs the various texts that make up *Mythologies*.

We inhabit a world, then, of signs which support existing power structures and which purport to be natural. The role of the mythologist, as Barthes sees it, is to expose these signs as the artificial constructs that they are, to reveal their workings and show that what appears to be natural is, in fact, determined by history. This is certainly how Barthes saw the role of the criticism in general in the autobiographical *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* and its relevance to *Mythologies* is clear:

... l'opÈration critique consiste ++ dÈchiffrer l'embarras des raisons, des alibis, des apparences, bref tout le *naturel* social, pour rendre manifeste l'Èchange rÈglÈ sur quoi reposent la marche sÈmantique et la vie collective. (Barthes: 1975 p.63)

## Myth and Ideology

Le propre des *Mythologies* n'est pas politique mais idÈologique. Le propre des *Mythologies*, c'est de prendre systÈmatiquement en bloc une sorte de monstre que j'ai appellÈ la 'petite-bourgeoisie' (quitte ++ en faire un mythe) et de taper inlassablement sur ce bloc; la mÈthode est peu scientifique et n'y prÈtendait pas; c'est pourquoi l'ouverture mÈthodologique n'est venue qu'ensuite, par la lecture de Saussure; la thÈorie des *Mythologies* est l'objet d'une *postface* (Barthes: 1971 p.96)

Il ne sortait pas de cette idÈe sombre, que la vraie violence, c'est celle du *cela-va-de-soi* (Barthes: 1975 p.88)

... on peut attaquer le monde et l'alienation idÈologique de notre monde quotidien, ++ bien des niveaux: *SystÈme de la mode* contient aussi une affirmation Èthique sur le monde, la mÈme d'ailleurs que dans des *Mythologies*, ++ savoir qu'il y a un mal, un mal social, idÈologique, attachÈ aux systÈmes de signes qui ne s'avouent pas franchement comme systÈmes de signes. Au lieu de reconnaÔtre que la culture est un systÈme immotivÈ de significations, la sociÈtÈ bourgeoise donne toujours des signes comme justifiÈs par la nature ou la raison. (Barthes: 1981 p.67)

It is possible to argue that 'myth', as Barthes uses it in *Mythologies*, functions as a synonym of 'ideology' (for a more detailed discussion of this complex issue see Brown: 1994 pp.24-38). As a theoretical construct 'ideology' is notoriously hard to define. However, one of the most pervasive definitions of the term holds that it refers to the body of beliefs and representations that sustain and legitimate current power relationships. Ideology promotes the values and interests of dominant groups within society. I like the explanation Terry Eagleton comes up with in his book *Ideology: An Introduction*:

A dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. (Eagleton: 1991 pp.5-6)

This particular definition of the workings of ideology is particularly relevant to *Mythologies*. Common to both Eagleton's definition of ideology and Barthes's understanding of myth is the notion of a socially constructed reality which is passed off as 'natural'. The opinions and values of a historically and socially specific class are held up as 'universal truths'. Attempts to challenge this naturalization and universalization of a socially constructed reality (what Barthes calls /*e cela-va-de-soi*) are dismissed for lacking 'bon sens', and therefore excluded from serious

consideration. The real power relations in society (between classes, between coloniser and colonised, between men and women etc.) are obscured, reference to all tensions and difficulties blocked out, glossed over, their political threat defused.

Let me try to clarify these points with an example from *Mythologies*. In 'Le vin et le lait' (Barthes: 1970 pp.74-77) Barthes explores the significance of wine to the French. Wine is clearly an important symbolic substance to the French expressive of conviviality, of virility and, more importantly, of national identity. Nothing could be more expressive of an 'essential Frenchness' than a *ballon de rouge*. The uproar caused at the beginning of Monsieur Coty's presidential term of office by being photographed at home next to a bottle of beer, rather than the obligatory bottle of red, captures this perfectly. Barthes unsettles the mythological associations of wine by making explicit wine's real status as just another commodity produced for profit. He draws attention to wine-makers' exploitation of the Third World, citing Algeria as an example of a poor Muslim country forced to use its land for the cultivation of a product - 'le produit d'une expropriation' (Barthes: 1970 p.77) - which they are forbidden to drink on religious grounds and which could be better used for cultivating food crops. Barthes makes explicit the connections between wine and the socio-economics of its production. And this is an integral part of his aim as a mythologist: he must expose the artificiality of those signs which disguise their historical and social origins.

## **Mythologies: A Postwar Text**

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* is concerned with a number of important postwar issues (see [Les trente glorieuses: France 1945-75](#) for a general overview of the period). These issues are both specifically French - peculiar to France of a particular historical period - and applicable to postwar developments in other European countries. These issues include:

[\[France's Imperial Crises\]](#) [\[The Sexual Politics of the Domestic\]](#) [\[Changing Patterns of Cultural Consumption\]](#) [\[Technocratic Icons of Modernization\]](#) [\[Institutional Inertia\]](#)

## **France's Imperial Crises**

Le mythe ne nie pas les choses, sa fonction est au contraire d'en parler; simplement, il les purifie, les innocentie, les fonde en nature et en Éternité, il leur donne une clarté qui n'est pas celle de l'explication, mais celle du constat ... (Barthes: 1970 p.230)

The period immediately following the Second World War were the years of decolonisation in which the former colonial powers were divested of their former territories. France, as the main imperial power after Great Britain, was inevitably deeply embroiled in these processes (mainly in Indochina and North Africa). France, at the time Barthes was writing *Mythologies*, was in the midst of a bloody and bitter colonial war: *la guerre d'Algérie*. Barthes's *Mythologies* is a book which responds to decolonisation and is all about Frenchness and French identity. There are references, for example, to right-wing politicians like Poujade and Le Pen who whipped up racist feelings in such articles as 'Quelques paroles de M. Poujade' (Barthes: 1970 pp.85-7) and 'Poujade et les intellectuels' (Barthes: 1970 pp.182-90). 'Bichon chez les nègres' (Barthes: 1970 pp.64-67) is another important text about racism.

One of the most approachable essays on France's colonial struggles - with more than a few contemporary resonances today - is 'Grammaire africaine' (Barthes: 1970 pp.137-144). As the title suggests 'Grammaire africaine' is an article about language, more specifically, about the language used in certain right-wing newspapers and magazines to describe, assess and analyse the conflict taking place in Algeria. What Barthes claimed to find every time he read a newspaper or magazine article on Algeria, was a carefully structured and codified way of talking and writing about Franco-Algerian relations with its own covert presuppositions and interests. Myth - which Barthes described as 'une parole d'Épolitisée' (Barthes: 1970 p.230) - is at work here and in

'Grammaire africaine' Barthes seeks to expose it by insisting on the social and historical 'situatedness' of the language used. What 'Grammaire africaine' is really about is the way in which a certain imperialist political agenda is smuggled into the reporting of foreign affairs. Barthes exposes the ideologically-loaded nature of the terminology used to describe France's major imperial conflict, identifying the key mendacious signifiers whose primary function is to conceal the realities of the Algerian war.

Those who seek independence from French rule, for example, are variously described as 'une bande' or as 'hors-la-loi' and their demands are therefore considered illegitimate. Such terms are never used for the *colons*, the French settlers who are invariably described as a 'communautÈ'. The presence of this 'communautÈ' is justified by the unique 'mission' France is obliged to carry out in the region. The so-called 'destin' of Algeria is with French colonizers rather than as an independent nation. In contradiction to the reality of the collapse of France's empire, this 'destin' is claimed to be fixed and immutable. The word 'guerre' is never used - Algeria was the quintessential *guerre sans nom*, the undeclared war - only terms like 'paix' and 'pacification'. More often than not, however, terms like 'dÈchirement' which suggest a natural - and therefore not man-made - disaster are used to designate the situation in Algeria.

The whole tone of much of French journalism's reporting of Algeria is marked by an attempt to drown out or disguise the true violence of the war. Language here is not an instrument of communication but of intimidation which seeks to pass off a specific version of events (i.e. that of the French state) as the sole valid interpretation and to marginalize those versions which contradict it:

Le vocabulaire officiel des affaires africaines est, on s'en doute, purement axiomatique. C'est dire qu'il n'a aucune valeur de communication, mais seulement d'intimidation. Il constitue donc une *Écriture*, c'est-++-dire un langage chargÈ d'opÈrer une coÔncidence entre les normes et les faits, et de donner ++ un rÈel cynique la caution d'une morale noble. D'une maniÈre gÈnÈrale, c'est un langage qui fonctionne essentiellement comme un code, c'est-++-dire que les mots y ont un rapport nul ou contraire ++ leur contenu. C'est une *Écriture* que l'on pourrait appeler cosmÈtique parce qu'elle vise ++ recouvrir les faits d'un bruit de langage ... (Barthes: 1970 p.137).

Another important article of relevance to Barthes's critique of French journalism's (mis)representation of politics in Algeria is 'La Critique Ni-Ni' (Barthes: 1970 p.144-46). It neatly takes apart those journalists who have perfected the art of taking sides whilst appearing to be neutral and merely expressing the voice of common sense. Common sense, suggests Barthes, deeply ideological. Rather than expressing natural, self-evident truths, it expresses the world-order and outlook of a historically specific social class. In his later writings Barthes replaces the term 'bon sens' or 'sens commun' with the term *doxa* which he uses to designate those ideas and values that claim their origins in common sense:

La *Doxa* (mot qui va revenir souvent), c'est l'*Opinion publique*, l'*Esprit majoritaire*, le *Consensus petit-bourgeois*, la *Voix du Naturel*, la *Violence du PrÈjugÈ* ... (Barthes: 1975 p.51)

## The Sexual Politics of the Domestic

The sexual politics of the domestic sphere (images of femininity, the role of women etc.) is another of the issues tackled by Barthes. The immediate postwar years throughout the western world were those of a *retour au foyer*, a reaffirmation of traditional gender roles (see [Women in Postwar France: the Domestic Ideal](#) for more details of this). Although the situation of French women during the war was different to that of their English or American sisters in that, in general,

French women did not enter the workforce occupying posts once held by men, their experience after the war was very much the same: an overt and covert attempt to push women back into the confines of the home and the roles of mother and housewife. After the liberation, French legislation targeting women was firmly based on women's role as *mamans de France*. As such, it continued the PÈtainist family policy and efforts to increase the birth rate. Quite apart from the specific legislation favouring women's *retour au foyer* (e.g. *les allocations familiales*) there was the ideological pressure coming from the church, the politicians and, above all, from the media.

It is interesting to note that one of the important development in the postwar years was the growing popularity of weekly and monthly magazines, particularly those aimed at a predominantly female readership like *Elle* (founded in 1945), *Marie-France*, *Marie-Claire* and *Femmes d'aujourd'hui*. It was publications like these that interested and irritated Barthes (see Barthes: 1981 pp.96-97). He even went so far as to describe *Elle* as a 'vÈritable trÈsor mythologique' (Barthes: 1970 p.128). The essay 'Conjugales' (Barthes: 1957 pp.47-50) is particularly interesting here. Barthes writes of the fascination of the popular press for marriages and the ways in which this legitimates a particular social organisation

L'union de Sylviane Carpentier, Miss Europe 53 et de son ami d'enfance, l'Èlectricien Michel Warembourg permet de dÈvelopper une image diffÈrente, celle de la chaumiÈre heureuse. Gr,ce ++ son titre, Sylviane aurait pu mener la carriÈre brillante d'une star, voyager, faire du cinÈma, gagner beaucoup d'argent: sage et modeste, elle a renoncÈ ++ "la gloire ephÈmÈre" et, fidÈle ++ son passÈ, elle a ÈpousÈ un Èlectricien de Palaiseau. Les jeunes Èpoux nous sont ici prÈsentÈs dans la phase postnuptiale de leur union, en train d'Ètablir les habitudes de leur bonheur et de s'installer dans l'anoymat d'un petit confort: on arrange le deux-piÈces-cuisine, on prend le petit dÈjeuner, on va au cinÈma, on fait le marchÈ.[...]

L'amour-plus-fort-que-la-gloire relance ici la morale du statu quo social: il n'est pas sage de sortir de sa condition, il est glorieux d'y rentrer. (Barthes: 1970 p.48)

The article 'Jouets' (Barthes: 1970 pp.58-60), although not explicitly about the sexual politics of the domestic, is concerned with the ways in which toys encourage children to adopt pre-determined gender and class positions. Children are encouraged to become owners rather than creative users of toys which appear to be 'productive' but which, Barthes claims, encourage passivity. 'Romans et enfants' (Barthes: 1907 pp.56-8) is an interesting essay on gender stereotyping, this time focussing on women writers. Women writers are seen as acceptable but they must pay a heavy price for their creativity by neglecting their 'biological destiny'. 'Celle qui voit clair' (Barthes: 1957 pp.125-8) is an article on the agony columns in women's magazines. The advice dispensed in these columns constructs a female condition - women, unlike men are defined by their close relation to the heart - which it claims to be eternal. No references are ever made to women's real social and economic conditions as their realm is the home and the heart. The notion - or myth - of woman promulgated in *le courrier du coeur* is that women have no other role than that defined by men:

... la morale du Courrier ne postule jamais pour la femme d'autre condition que parasitaire: seul le mariage, en la nommant juridiquement, la fait exister. On retrouve ici la structure mÈme du gynÈcÈe, dÈfini comme une libertÈ close sous le regard extÈrieur de l'homme. (Barthes: 1970 p.127)

## The Changing Culture of the Working Class

For me, cultural studies really begins with the debate about the nature of social and cultural change in postwar Britain. An attempt to address the manifest break-up of

traditional culture, especially traditional class cultures, it set about registering the impact of the new forms of affluence and consumer society on the very hierarchical and pyramidal structure of British society. Trying to come to terms with the fluidity and the undermining impact of the mass media and of an emerging mass society on this old European class society, it registered the long-delayed entry of the United Kingdom into the modern world. (Hall: 1990 p.12)

The thirty years between *libÈration* and the first *crise pÈtroliÈre* popularly known as *les trente glorieuses* were years of unbroken prosperity and consistent economic growth. The changing cultural conditions of a working-class made more prosperous - and more petit-bourgeois according to Barthes - due to the higher standards of living of the postwar period. This, remember, is the era of the so-called 'affluent worker' with more disposable income than ever before. What did this 'affluent worker' buy and what were his/her cultural habits? One of the developments Barthes is writing about in *Mythologies*, is the transition from a genuine popular culture deep-rooted in ordinary working-class people's ways of life to mass culture which Barthes sees as a petit-bourgeois phenomenon imposed upon a newly affluent working class. Indeed, one could go further and claim that this is the claim of the book: the death of an authentic popular culture at the hands of petit-bourgeois mass culture.

## Technocratic Icons

The status of technocratic icons within contemporary society (the CitroÎn DS, the Eiffel Tower etc.) is another theme in Barthes's *Mythologies*. In the postwar world things become charged with a new value and significance. As consumer durables become more affordable and more and more people are able to acquire such possessions as cars and washing machines. The power and presence of advertizing also becomes more noticeable. Important essays include 'Saponides et les dÈtergents' (Barthes: 1970 pp.38-40), 'La nouvelle CitroÎn' (Barthes: 1970 pp.150-2) and 'PublicitÈ et profondeur' (Barthes: 1970 p.82). The principal aim of these essays is to reveal the petite-bourgeoisie as self-congratulatory, enamoured of its material benefits and its so-called technological advances.

In postwar France the car became the very symbol of modernity. This is reflected in a number of films of the period such as *Lola* (1960), *La Belle AmÈricaine* (1961) and, more catastrophically, Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967). The automobile industry was central to France's increasing industrialization with Renault's vast modern factory at Billancourt as its most visible reminder. This factory, incidentally, provided the setting for Claire Etcherelli's ...*lise ou la vraie vie* (1967). In 'La nouvelle CitroÎn' (Barthes: 1970 p.150-2) Barthes understands this perfectly and analyses the ways in which the car has become the very icon of France's modernization. He compares the car to a mediaeval cathedral: both are works produced by anonymous artists which enchant the masses.

There are other articles on the importance of advertizing, the 'hidden persuaders' (Vance Packard) which was increasingly used in postwar France to fuel the consumer boom. Jean-Luc Godard in *Une femme mariÈe* (1964), *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1966) and *Masculin-fÈminin* (1966) explores the role of mass-produced images in his films of the 1960s but Barthes is already there before him. Advertizing creates ultimately alienating images of a bourgeois *savoir-vivre* to which everyone is encouraged to aspire. More than this, however, advertizing is responsible for promoting the 'myth' of free choice. In 'Saponides et dÈtergents' (Barthes: 1970 pp.38-40) he discusses the different advertising approaches to Omo and Persil. Their advertising promotes two different products with two different properties. In reality, these two products are almost the same and are both manufactured by the Anglo-Dutch multinational Unilever.

## Institutional Inertia

The atrophy and complacency, mendacity and inertia of French institutions (the educational system, the judiciary etc.) was something that preoccupied the French as much as the English in the postwar period and especially Barthes. Miscarriages of justice, an educational system that was dogmatic and out-of-touch with its youth, a complacent and arrogant political class.

In 'Dominici ou le triomphe de la littérature' (Barthes: 1970 pp.50-53) Barthes argues that the language used to condemn Gaston Dominici implies a whole psychology of petit-bourgeois assumptions and linguistic terrorism. He was a simple peasant accused of killing a family of English holiday makers and faced with a legal language he did not understand. In 'Le Procès Dupriez' (Barthes: 1970 pp.102-105) Gérard Dupriez, a man who killed his father and mother without motive is condemned to death because the law works on a fixed notion of what constitutes the psychology of human motivation.

## The Intellectual and Mass Culture

Many have claimed, and with good reason, that *Mythologies* is one of the principal texts of contemporary cultural studies. John Storey has described it as 'one of the founding texts of cultural studies' (Storey: 1992 p.77) and Antony Easthope as one of the two books (the other being Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*) that 'initiate modern cultural studies' (Easthope: 1991 p.140). Barthes is fundamental to contemporary cultural studies because he was amongst the first to take seriously 'mass culture' and to apply to it methods of analysis formerly the preserve of 'high culture'. What makes Barthes even more interesting was that he did this at a time of rapid social and economic change when cultural practices were undergoing major shifts.

Certainly, Barthes's *Mythologies* is a text that breaks new ground insofar as it takes as the object of its intellectual inquiry the world of mass culture: cinema, sport, advertising, the popular press, women's magazines and so on. Barthes was one of the earliest commentators on mass culture, on the modern consumer culture of the postwar era. Barthes expands the definition of intellectual activity in France. He examines a strikingly broad range of subjects and cultural artefacts: wrestling, the circus, shopping, toys, cars, washing powders, food, women's magazines, beauty competitions, photography, popular fiction.

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* is a book which plays around in the consumer toyshop. It is a text which plunges into the 'image trove' (see Rylance: 1994 pp.63-64) of culture - understood in the most inclusive way possible - to find new objects of intellectual speculation. *Mythologies* takes great relish in its exploration of cultural artefacts and phenomena. The book enacts a paradox in its imaginative and playful readings of culture in a heavily mythologized world which should have abolished such imaginative play.

On one level, what Barthes seems to be doing in *Mythologies* destabilizing the boundary between 'high culture' and 'popular culture'. Barthes accords popular culture a complexity, a density and richness of texture thought to be the sole preserve of high culture. One key example of this is wrestling discussed in the article 'Le monde o- l'on catche' (Barthes: 1970 pp.13-24). Wrestling is often thought of as the least intellectual pastime in our culture and is dismissed as vulgar fodder to the uneducated masses. What Barthes does, in a striking and provocative gesture, is claim that wrestling and its audience are in fact every bit as sophisticated as high drama or opera. Wrestling is a modern variant of the classical theatre or of an ancient religious rite in which the spectacle of suffering and humiliation is played out. Like these high cultural forms, wrestling is a formal spectacle informed by fixed codes and conventions and played out in rigorously formalized gestures and movements. It is every bit as codified, conventionalized and choreographed as classical tragedy - the dramatic genre to which Barthes compares wrestling throughout the article. Another important article which adopts a similar approach is 'Au Music-Hall' (Barthes: 1970 pp.176-179) about, as the title suggests music hall. In this article Barthes

invokes the nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire to describe the formalized beauties of the spectacle.

Although Barthes undertakes a sympathetic appraisal of two cultural practices that one would certainly not describe as belonging to the world of 'high culture', these two articles are exceptions. Moreover, both wrestling and music hall are two manifestations of earlier forms of popular culture rather than modern mass culture. Barthes can grant them the same value as high cultural forms because they belong to and spring from a recognisable tradition. Barthes's analysis of mass culture which forms the basis of most of the book, on the other hand, is characterized by a certain denunciatory rhetoric. Barthes sees modern mass culture as controlled by the ethos of the *petite-bourgeoisie*. The working class have lost their own *culture populaire* and have bought into a culture - *la culture petit-bourgeoise* - which is not their own.

The essays collected in *Mythologies* express both pessimism and nostalgia: pessimism at the state of culture in France which, contrary to what most people think, is threatened by mass culture which seeks to homogenize and efface difference; nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian state (literally, before the fall) when the working class had their own vibrant culture, an authentic *culture populaire* which proudly asserted its difference from petit-bourgeois norms. Barthes sees culture as somehow fallen under the influence of the petty-bourgeoisie. Take these statements made by Barthes in later interviews and writings:

La populaire? Ici, disparition de toute activité magique ou poétique: plus de carnaval, on ne joue plus avec les mots: fin des métaphores, règne des stéréotypes imposés par la culture petite-bourgeoise. (Barthes: 1973 p.62)

... le prolétariat (les producteurs) n'a aucune culture propre: dans les pays dits développés, son langage est celui de la petite-bourgeoisie, parce que c'est le langage qui lui est offert par les communications de masse (grande presse, radio, télévision): la culture de masse est petite-bourgeoise (Barthes: 1984 p.110)

L'un des aspects de la crise de la culture, en France, c'est précisément que les Français, dans leur masse, me semble-t-il, ne s'intéressent pas ++ leur langue. Le goût de la langue française a été entièrement hypothéqué par la scolarité bourgeoise; s'intéresser ++ la langue française, ++ sa musicalité (...) est devenu par la force des choses une attitude esthétisante, mandarinale. Et pourtant, il y a eu des moments où un certain contact était maintenu entre le 'peuple' et la langue, ++ travers la poésie populaire, la chanson populaire ou la pression même de la masse pour transformer la langue en dehors des écoles-musées. On dirait que le contact a disparu; on ne le perçoit pas aujourd'hui dans la culture 'populaire', qui n'est guère qu'une culture fabriquée (par la radio, la télévision etc.). (Barthes: 1981 p.177)

Contrary to the accepted opinion of France as the powerhouse of European culture, Barthes sees France as a deeply philistine country with little understanding or appreciation of the complexities of intellectual and cultural life. *Mythologies* is a very entrenched and self-defensive collection of texts, and may be read as an apology or defence of intellectuals against the incursion of the barbarity of mass culture. Andrew Leak's description of the attitude adopted by Barthes in *Mythologies* as a 'posture of isolation and singularity' (Leak: 1994 p.9) is a good one. Barthes expresses a self-consciously intellectual contempt for mass-culture. According to Barthes the intellectual has to retain distance from the mass, must become what Claude Duneton calls a 'rieur' and maintain a sarcastic or ironic distance from mass culture. This conviction is apparent at the very beginning of *Mythologies*:

... je réclame de vivre pleinement la contradiction de mon temps, qui peut faire d'un sarcasme la condition de la vérité. (Barthes: 1970 p.10)

Although he may have a valid point in claiming that much mass culture is a degraded, inferior replacement to popular culture, he doesn't acknowledge that the consumers of mass culture may well be able to resist its messages. In short, Barthes produces a patronizing portrait of the consumer as a passive recipient, a void, an empty vessel waiting to be filled, to be told what to think and how to act. Indeed, one of the criticisms that can - and have - been made of the work of 'early' Barthes (i.e. of the 1950s and early 1960s) is that he is too text-oriented and does not concern himself with how texts are received and consumed. Barthes's account of a working class uncritically consuming an alien - and alienating - culture seems to belong to a familiar tradition of intellectual contempt for both that culture and its audience.

To conclude this section then, I would claim that although Barthes goes some way in abolishing what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would later call 'la frontière sacrée' (Bourdieu: 1979 p.7) between 'high culture' and 'popular culture', granting the latter a complexity once considered the sole preserve of the former, *Mythologies* nonetheless is informed by a certain hierarchy of cultural value. Mass culture is clearly seen as inferior to both the 'high culture' it mimics and the 'popular culture' it replaces. This disdain for, and condemnation of, mass culture runs throughout the book.

## Mass Culture and The Intellectual

L'opinion courante n'aime pas le langage des intellectuels. Aussi a-t-il été souvent fiché sous l'accusation de jargon intellectualiste. Il se sentait alors l'objet d'une sorte de racisme: on excluait son langage, c'est-à-dire son corps: 'tu ne parles pas comme moi, donc je t'exclus.'<sup>a</sup> (Barthes: 1975 p.107)

In *Mythologies* mass culture is seen to have an altogether harmful effect on French political and cultural life, homogenizing difference and encouraging uniformity to petit-bourgeois social norms. But this mass culture is also seen to be hostile to any questioning or intellectual inquiry. This explains in part the often defensive and entrenched position Barthes adopts in his discussion of representations of the intellectual within mass culture. In a piece written for *Le Monde* in 1974 on the status of the intellectual in France, Barthes made the claim that:

L'intellectuel est traité comme un sourcier pourraient l'être par une peuplade de marchands, d'hommes d'affaires et de l'Église: il est celui qui dérange des intégrités idéologiques. L'anti-intellectualisme est un mythe historique, lié sans doute à l'ascension petite-bourgeoise. Poujade a donné naguère ce mythe sa forme toute crue ('le poisson pourrit par la tête'). (Barthes: 1981 p.186)

Poujade's claim that a dead fish starts to rot from the head down is indicative of petit-bourgeois distrust of intellectuals, a distrust that Barthes appears to come across again and again in his readings of mass culture. In a number of the texts like 'L'Écrivain en vacances' (Barthes: 1970 pp.30-33) discuss this. 'L'Écrivain en vacances' about the portrayal by a right-wing newspaper (*Le Figaro*) of well-known writers on holiday. 'La Critique Ni-Ni' (Barthes: 1970 pp.144-146) is an interesting essay to read in the light of Barthes's preoccupation with the marginalization of the intellectual in French society by the popular press.

'Critique muette et aveugle' (Barthes: 1970 pp.36-7) argues that one common form of anti-intellectualism is to feign incomprehension. The challenge of difficult ideas can be disarmed and their intellectual threat defused. By accusing a writer of being obscure and lacking 'le bon sens', one can escape serious argument and, more importantly, avoid having to make explicit one's own ideological position. They seek to avoid serious intellectual debate by appealing to a universal common sense. Barthes, however, holds firm to the notion of the intellectual's responsibility to challenge such dominant - and complacent - modes of thought, as he makes clear in a later text:

Admettons que la tâche historique de l'intellectuel (ou de l'Écrivain), ce soit aujourd'hui d'entretenir et d'accentuer la décomposition de la conscience bourgeoise. Il faut alors garder ++ l'image toute sa précision; cela veut dire que l'on feint volontairement de rester ++ l'intérieur de cette conscience et qu'on va la délabrer, l'affaisser, l'effondrer, sur place, comme on ferait d'un morceau de sucre en l'imbiant d'eau. (Barthes: 1975 p.67)

## The Politics of *Mythologies*

The decidedly idiosyncratic Marxisms of Sartre and Brecht are as 'useful' to him as is Marx himself. Barthes's attitude towards constituted theoretical thought in *Mythologies* - and elsewhere - could be described as cavalier, in the best sense of the word: he picks up concepts, uses them, and drops them when they have outstayed their welcome. (Leak: 1994 p.38)

The question of Barthes's politics has long been a problem to Barthes's critics. He is notoriously difficult to pin down - he prides himself on being *irrééritable* - on the matter of political allegiances past and present. He began and, arguably, ended his intellectual career as a 'man of the left' but he was never a member of the Parti communiste français (PCF) unlike so many other writers and intellectuals in the postwar period.

But Barthes's *Mythologies* as a collection of polemical texts taking issue with the taken-for-granted truths of our culture, engage with all important political questions. As a mythologist who finds everywhere, even in the most unlikely places, the hidden myths which help perpetuate the *status quo*, Barthes in *Mythologies* cannot but take sides.

In Barthes's view, myth reinforces the ideology of capitalist society. The essence of myth is that it disguises what are in fact bourgeois representations as facts of a universal nature. Myth like ideology is ever-present it is impossible to escape or elude it on a daily level.

*Mythologies* examines the ways the petty bourgeoisie in twentieth-century France naturalizes and universalizes its own values via specific mechanisms - the press, advertising, the legal system and the like. Barthes examines the way in which apparently apolitical activities - wrestling, the Tour de France, strip-tease, drinking wine and eating steak and chips - are expressive of certain ideological positions. French culture appears to be natural but is, in fact, deeply historical and political.

The *petite bourgeoisie* projects a certain state of affairs - a state of affairs in their own interest - as being natural with the aim of naturalizing it, legitimating it by making it appear immutable, unchangeable. Brian Rigby claims that 'There is a distinct Marxist strain in *Mythologies*, and the essays can be seen as an attempt to show how the whole of mass culture is a capitalist mystification of social and cultural reality' (Rigby: 1991 p.177). The essay 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' comes close to being a theory of ideology as a system of representations by which the ruling class reproduces its dominance at the level of daily experience.

## Barthes and Semiology

On peut donc concevoir une science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale; elle formerait une partie de la psychologie sociale, et par conséquent de la psychologie générale; nous la nommerons sémiologie (du Grec σῆμα, 'signe'). Elle nous apprendrait en quoi consistent les signes, quelles lois les régissent. Puisqu'elle n'existe pas encore, on ne peut dire ce qu'elle sera; mais elle a droit ++ l'existence, sa place est déterminée d'avance. La linguistique n'est qu'une partie de cette science générale, les lois que découvrira la sémiologie seront applicables ++

la linguistique, et celle-ci se trouvera ainsi rattachée ++ un domaine bien défini dans l'ensemble des faits humains. (Saussure: 1949 p.33)

... ++ l'obsession politique et morale succède un petit délire scientifique (Barthes: 1975 p.148)

Passion constante (et illusoire) d'apposer sur tout fait, même le plus menu, non pas la question de l'enfant: pourquoi? mais la question de l'ancien Grec, la question du sens, comme si toutes choses frissonnaient de sens: qu'est-ce que ça veut dire? Il faut ++ tout prix transformer le fait en idée, en description, en interprétation, bref lui trouver un autre nom que le sien. (Barthes: 1975 p.154)

Barthes is particularly interested, not so much in what things mean, but in how things mean. One of the reasons Barthes is a famous and well-known intellectual figure is his skill in finding, manipulating and exploiting theories and concepts of how things come to mean well before anyone else. As an intellectual, Barthes is associated with a number of intellectual trends (e.g. structuralism and post-structuralism) in postwar intellectual life. However, at the time of *Mythologies*, Barthes main interest was in semiology, the 'science of signs'.

Semiology derives from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's linguistic theory as elaborated in *Cours de linguistique générale*, a collection of lectures written between 1906 and 1911 and posthumously published in book form in 1915, was philosophically quite radical because it held that language was *conceptual* and not, as a whole tradition of western thought had maintained, *referential*. In particular, Saussure rejected the view that language was essentially a nomenclature for a set of antecedent notions and objects. Language does not 'label' or 'baptise' already discriminated pre-linguistic categories but actually articulates them. The view of language as nomenclature cannot fully explain the difficulties of foreign language acquisition nor the ways in which the meanings of words change in time. Saussure reversed the perspective that viewed language as the medium by which reality is represented, and stressed instead the constitutive role language played in constructing reality for us. Experience and knowledge, all cognition is mediated by language. Language organizes brute objects, the flux of sound, noise and perception, getting to work on the world and conferring it with meaning and value. Language is always at work in our apprehension of the world. There is no question of passing through language to a realm of language-independent, fully discriminated things.

Central to Saussure's work is the concept of the sign and the relationship between what he terms signifier and signified. Indeed, a sign is, in Saussure's terms, the union of a signifier and a signified which form an indissociable unity like two sides of the same piece of paper. Saussure defined the linguistic sign as composed of a signifier or *signifiant* and a signified or *signifié*. The term sign then, is used to designate the associative total of signifier and signified. The signifier is the sound or written image and the signified is the concept it articulates:

... le signe linguistique unit non une chose et un nom, mais un concept et une image acoustique (Saussure: 1949 p.98)

For example, /cat/ is the signifier of the signified 'cat'. Saussure claimed that the connection between signifier and signified was entirely arbitrary - 'Le lien unissant le signifiant au signifié est arbitraire' (Saussure: 1949 p.100), that there was no intrinsic link between sound-image and concept. However, the linguistic sign was, as well as arbitrary, was a relational or differential entity. The signifier produces meaning by virtue of its position, (similarity or difference) within a network of other signifiers. According to Saussure words do not express or represent but signify in relation to a matrix of other linguistic signs. To return to my earlier example, the signifier 'cat' signifies the concept of a domestic feline quadruped only by virtue of its position (similarity or difference) within the relational system of other signifiers. In defining the linguistic sign in this

way Saussure broke with a philosophical tradition which conceived of language as having a straightforward relationship with the extralinguistic world.

The key text which exemplifies Barthes's early interest in and exploitation of Saussure and Semiology is 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui'. 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' is Barthes's retrospectively written method or blueprint for reading myths. In 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' Barthes manipulates and reworks Saussure's theory of the sign and of signification. He is not, however, interested in the linguistic sign *per se* so much as in the application of linguistics to the non-verbal signs that exist around us in our everyday life. What excites him is the possibility of applying a methodology derived from Saussurean linguistics to the domain of culture defined in its broadest and most inclusive sense.

Barthes's relationship with his intellectual influences - Marx, Brecht, Freud, Lacan etc. - is notoriously idiosyncratic. He rarely adopts ideas wholesale, but tends to alter them to his own purposes, extending their reach and implications. This is certainly true of his appropriation of Saussure's theories. But how does Barthes make use of Saussure's theory of the sign and of signification? Well, let's take Barthes's own example from 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui':

... je suis chez le coiffeur, on me tend un numÈro de *Paris-Match*. Sur la couverture, un jeune nÈgre vÈtu d'un uniforme franÈais fait le salut militaire, les yeux levÈs, fixÈs sans doute sur un pli du drapeau tricolore. Cela, c'est le sens de l'image. Mais naÔfs ou pas, je vois bien ce qu'elle me signifie: que la France est un grand Empire, que tous ses fils, sans distinction de couleur, servent fidÈlement sous son drapeau, et qu'il n'est de meilleure rÈponse aux dÈtracteurs d'un colonialisme prÈtendu, que le zÈle de ce noir ++ servir ses prÈtendus oppresseurs. (Barthes: 1970 p.201)

Barthes then, is at the barber's and is handed a copy of *Paris-Match*. On the front cover he sees a photograph of a black soldier saluting the French flag and he instantly recognises the myth the photograph is seeking to peddle. However, Barthes provides a methodological justification for this essentially intuitive 'reading' of the photograph, a methodology derived from Saussure's theory of the sign. Barthes sees the figuration of the photograph, that is to say, the arrangement of coloured dots on a white background as constituting the signifier and the concept of the black soldier saluting the tricolour as constituting the signified. Together, they form the sign. However, Barthes takes this reading one step further and argues that there is a second level of signification grafted on to the first sign. This first sign becomes a second-level signifier for a new sign whose signified is French imperialty, i.e. the idea that France's empire treats all its subjects equally.

The central modification to Saussure's theory of the sign in 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' is the articulation of the idea of primary or first-order signification and secondary or second-order signification. This is central to Barthes's intellectual preoccupation in *Mythologies* because it is at the level of secondary or second-order signification that myth is to be found. In 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' Barthes attempts to define myth by reference to the theory of second-degree sign systems. What myth does is appropriate a first-order sign and use it as a platform for its own signifier which, in turn, will have its own signified, thus forming a new sign. Recurrent images used to describe this process pertain to theft, colonization, violent appropriation and to parasitism:

... le mythe est ... un langage qui ne veut pas mourir: il arrache aux sens dont il s'alimente une survie insidieuse, dÈgradÈe, il provoque en eux un sursis artificiel dans lequel il s'installe ++ l'aise, il en fait des cadavres parlants. (Barthes: 1970 p.219)

This is a central and particularly powerful image of myth as an alien creature inhabiting human form and profiting from its appearance of innocence and naturalness to do its evil business. Like

a parasite needs its host or the B-movie style alien invader needs its zombie-like Earthling, myth needs is first-order sign for survival. It needs the first-order sign as its *alibi*: I wasn't being ideological, myth might innocently claim, I was somewhere else doing something innocent.

His model of second-degree or parasitical sign systems allows for the process of demystification by a process of foregrounding the construction of the sign, of the would-be natural texts of social culture. Myth is to be found at the level of the second-level sign, or at the level of *connotation*. Barthes makes a distinction between *denotation* and *connotation*. Denotation can be described, for the sake of convenience, as the literal meaning. Connotation, on the other hand, is the second-order parasitical meaning. The first-order sign is the realm of denotation; the second-order sign the realm of connotation and, therefore, of myth. To put it crudely then, the important 'lesson' of 'Le Mythe aujourd'hui' is that objects and events always signify more than themselves, they are always caught up in systems of representation which add meaning to them.

There are a number of very useful web sites which you might want to click on: Daniel Chandler's [Semiotics for Beginners](#) is a good place to start and there is also a [Media and Communications Studies Site](#) with links to other web sites of relevant interest.

## Further Reading

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