
HM 344

Introduction to Semiotics



Understanding "Mythologies" -Roland Barthes

Assignment 1

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March 28, 2024

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1 Introduction

This is about understanding the very important aspect that we see in the semiotics which is regarding the mythologies that prevail in our surrounding and the society. Here in this assignment we will uncover the meaning of the given mythology with a view of a semiotician.

2 Mythologies

2.1 The Blue Guide

We start with the very well-known book "The Blue Guide." This book is an essential thing for people who want to travel to Europe, more specifically the United Kingdom. From old times, it was noticed that people used to carry travel guides to find their destination, as they comprised of famous and beautiful places and also shows the culture that prevailed in that region. But this is a matter of question because no one has ever questioned the naturalness or innocence that the author and editor of such books want to show us. Barthes uses semiotic tools like the signifiers and signified mention in the passage, denotation which is the factual description of that place and connotation which add the ideological weight to it. We see a lot of things hidden behind the references (considering the myths) we get from the travel guide or, in modern days, the Internet, and they include things like the current situation, the culture that prevails in that decor, and the ideology that is followed among a group of people living there. All things are always missing. In the first half itself, Barthes highlights that why should one always see the mountains, gorges, and torrents? Why cannot we see other scenery, such as the plains or plateaus, in that region? We don't talk about the soil in that region. We only consider that point if there is something particular about the fertility and crops of that soil, which seems quite natural. Barthes motive was not to hinder the thought process that we consider natural, but it is just that one should be aware of how that person is influenced, maybe knowingly or unknowingly. We consider the travel guides to be labor-saving as they reduce our efforts to find places to visit and learn more about those places.

Further, apart from the monuments, we should consider other aspects, like

the fact that in the book "The Blue Guide", it is stated that men exist as "types." He gives some examples by considering Basque the sailor, Catalan the tradesman, and Cantabrian the highlander. This all makes the very common bourgeois mythology, which is made when people like the ones above have capitalist thinking. This reduces the reality that Spain has, apart from just having those ancient monuments. The author indicates the myth that is carried by the book; this only shows that Spain is a country full of churches, crosses, spires, Romanesque porches, etc. This strongly tells us that the author is biased toward one religion, which is Christianity. From his or her perception, all the art and monuments are built with reference to this one religion, moreover, Catholicism. This not only indicates that the book is not able to support secularism, but it may also hurt the sentiments of people from other minority groups or castes. This makes a person encounter Spanish history, which is primarily formed by Christianity, which suppresses the Muslim civilization or any other religion of that region. Thus, the author suggests that the book is lacking in phenomenology and its explanation for such a view that cultivates in one individual. This proves that for a modern traveler, it would be difficult to cross even the present countryside with that old, historic evaluation of thoughts. This shows that the book is not hiding the truth but rather the present culture of the region, as well as the economics, sociology, and some town planning of that region. This creates an alibi for its culture by not showcasing the key aspects that one should have while traveling through that place. Though we may find that this old-fashioned approach to the book is better to use, there are some books, like the "Michelin Guide," that indicate the facilities of those places nearby in addition to their historic or natural aspects. At last, the guide does not mention the extremists or the nationalist moments that took place in the past. So we would conclude that The Blue Guide seems to be natural as it is, but it has this nature of bias toward some myths in the region.

2.2 Neither-Nor Criticism

We would begin by figuring out what this is all about. Barthes believed that criticism has to be a well-rounded essay. According to him, it shouldn't be either political or complimentary, nor should it be either reactionary or communist. He bases this on the argument that it is neither a recreational activity

nor a public utility. It is common to come across statements about criticism in political or public speaking contexts. What is most noticeable about these individuals' language is the use of word power to convey the statement, which has two meanings: sometimes it appears to be spiritually ideal, but other times it has a judgmental quality. In this mythology, Barthes employs several semiotic strategies to uncover its true meaning. A few of these techniques include demystification, where Barthes exposes the ideologies and the hidden meaning of this "Neither-Nor Criticism" and gives his thoughts. The other method that he adopts is the deconstruction of the sentences, in which the style is broken down into binary opposition, and afterward, it exposes the manipulation of the language that person is using. In this excerpt, we decipher that the Neither-Nor first creates a false sense of neutrality among the ideas presented, and then it sets up some ideologies that are bad against the culture that they think is good. But while doing this, Barthes mentions that the bourgeois forget that culture in itself is an ideology. From a true perspective, this shows that the term "ideology" is loaded with negativity by middle-class people, while on the other hand, they showcase "culture" as its better aspect. This defines the morality of the terms, which creates a myth and hinders its true meaning by hiding it with such terminology. We also interpret that the idea that the critic is free from any interrelated ideas or beliefs is a myth because everyone has a set of their own beliefs that shape their process of judgment. This kind of word is criminal, as it seems quite simplistic, but it does not let others expose its complexity. This is considered a myth of timelessness, which is an art for all time by Barthes. Barthes mentions freedom, which is "the refusal of a priori judgments." He gives his perspective that freedom for any critic is not that one should refuse to take risks or venture around; it is to make his risks and ventures more obvious and certain.

In the second bourgeois system, Barthes says that style or good writing as a universal value is now getting outdated because a style needs history, and only focusing on that can miss the complexities of contemporary writing. This says that only mentioning such things can lay a good foundation for literature. So for a good writer, Barthes suggests that one should not adopt "bad writing". If the style of "good writing" is not working, perhaps it is just "writing." Where a proper appraisal would be given in a more true and natural context, To sum up,

for relevant contemporary criticism, we need binary thinking, which is a social and political discourse that simplifies complex issues, and for that, Barthe's advice to have a more nuanced approach will be valuable forever. Another aspect is the power of language as it shapes meaning, which is very crucial in today's era of information. Hence, we should learn to analyze the persuasive power of words used in our surroundings.

2.3 The Great Family of man

This excerpt is about the very famous photographic exhibition that was held in Paris and later in many corners of the world. This work comprises many photographs taken by famous photographers from a wide range of different places, with different aspects or motives, but overall, it depicts the mainstream of human life, that is, the birth of a child, the death of a person, work, knowledge, and other similar behaviors that everyone possesses. If we look at these photographs, we can notice that they have the same type of behavior, and this is called "The Family of Man," which came from the United States and was later translated by the French as "The Great Family of Man." This whole excerpt and motive of that exhibition was to show the unity in species, specifically the human 'community'. Now this is what seems like a myth to Roland Barthes; he infers that this can mislead us from humanism, and for this he had put some thoughts. He mentions this whole idea through semiology by using the concepts of deconstruction, signifiers, and signified for this exhibition. Let us analyze this myth in two stages. In the first stage, he mentions some of the signifiers, such as differences in skin color, customs, and skulls, which were signified as part of diversity and exoticism. On the contrary, in the next stage, he mentions other signifiers such as birth, work, laughter, and death, which signifies that beneath every human, everything remains the same. The author focuses on the idea of unity. This was considered a two-stage manipulation by Barthes. He argues that the exhibition first has signifiers like visual differences, which is a surface level of understanding, then suddenly the view changes to common human behavior, which is a myth of universal human nature. He says that by using quotes beneath the photographs, which are generally taken from the Old Testament or are just another primitive proverb that defines and symbolizes eternal wisdom, Barthes argues that this step is considered a leap from history

that is created and works as a kind of deception. The idea that we are all the same underneath is demonstrated, and while this may seem more profound, if we grasp what it means, we can see that the quotes are there to safeguard these concepts. The quote from the Old Testament is a signifier (the benevolent gaze of God); here, the signified is the religious authority, which adds a moral justification to the photograph taken. Barthes conveys that this adds a layer of legitimacy to the myth and makes us understand that universal human nature is unquestionable, which is not true completely, deflects mankind, and shows the false image of human existence. For this idea, Barthes considers these statements as gnomic truths that highlight the timeless human experience while ignoring the historical realities.

We find another semiotic term: discourse. In many of such cases, discourse suppresses the ulterior zone of humanity, which is prevented by sentimentality, as Barthes claims. Another concept is that it places nature at the bottom of every historic event, which is considered mystification. For this, Barthes asks us to look at one example of the young Negro Emmet Till, who was assassinated by whites. Where is the universal nature here? Barthes on this gave us an example that the exhibition had. He asks people to look into a child's birth; it is quite a natural process. Adding a layer of universal nature doesn't fit well here, as the main motive of such a picture should be to convey the suffering of a mother, whether the child is born with ease or not, and what would be his future in the near future. This should be the aim of the photograph. And similar goes with the death of a person: whether the person died was a gentleman or not, was his life fruitful or not, whether he suffered his whole life or he died in serene. The same is true with work; it seems to be natural until we have a sense of profitability in it. So Barthes argues that the exhibition doesn't celebrate the reality of mankind; it creates an alibi of wisdom and lyricism.