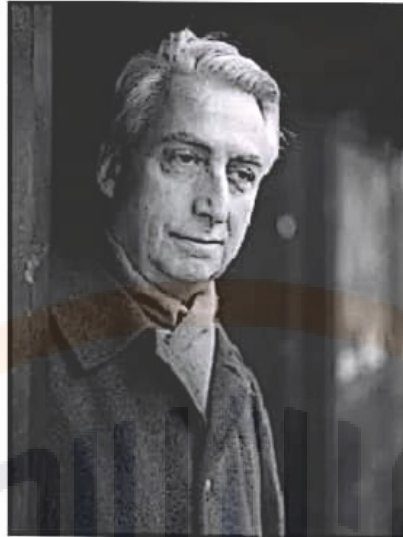


Roland Barthes: Mythologies



Roland Barthes an Introduction:

Roland Gérard Barthes was a French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician of 20th century. He was born on 12 November 1915 in Cherbourg, a town of Normandy France. His work engaged in the analysis of a variety of sign systems, mainly derived from Western popular culture. He was influenced by Saussure, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Sartre, Bataille, Michelet, Valéry and Lyotard. His ideas explored a diverse range of fields and influenced the development of many schools of theory, including:

- Structuralism
- post-structuralism
- anthropology
- literary theory

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Barthes is perhaps best known for his collection of essays **Mythologies**. It was published in 1957. This work contained reflections on popular culture. He also wrote an essay "**The Death of the Author**" in 1967. This essay critiqued traditional approaches in literary criticism. During his academic career he was primarily associated with the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and the Collège de France. He died in Paris, France at the age of 64 on 26 March 1980 from the chest injuries he had sustained in the crash.

What is Myth?

- "A person or thing having only imaginary or unverifiable existence."
- "An idea or story that is believed by many people but that is not true."

This shows the dictionary definitions of the word "myth" but Ronald Barthes defines it little bit different from dictionaries. **According to him "Myth" is a type of speech. And myth is a system of communication. It is a message.** According to his definition of myth, it can be said that it is kind of speech that includes system of **signs** like other ways of communication. These signs are to be used for special type of message that is **myth**. But **this message remains hidden from ordinary people.**

Mythologies by Roland Barthes:

"**Mythologies**" is a book by Roland Barthes. It was published in 1957 in French and in 1972 it was published in English. It is a collection of essays taken from *Les Lettres nouvelles*. It examines the tendency of contemporary social value systems to create modern myths. Barthes also looks at the semiology of the process of myth creation, updating Ferdinand de Saussure's system of sign analysis by adding a second level where signs are elevated to the level of myth.

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The book is split into two sections, **Mythologies and Myth Today**. The first section consists of a collection of essays on selected modern myths. The second section further deals with general analysis of the concept. The first section of *Mythologies* describes a selection of modern cultural phenomena, chosen for their status as modern myths and for the added meaning that has been conferred upon them. Each short chapter analyses one such myth, ranging from Einstein's Brain to Soap Powders and Detergents. They were originally written as a series of bi-monthly essays for the magazine *Les Lettres Nouvelles*.

In a typical example, Barthes describes the image that has been built up around red wine and how it has been adopted as a French national drink. how it is seen as a social equaliser and the drink of the proletariat, partly because it is seen as blood-like (as in Holy Communion) and points out that very little attention is paid to red wine's harmful effects to health. But that it is instead viewed as life-giving and refreshing — 'in cold weather. It is associated with all the myths of becoming warm, and at the height of summer, with all the images of shade, with all things cool and sparkling.'

In another chapter, Barthes explores the myth of professional wrestling. He describes how, unlike in the sport of boxing, the aim of theatrical stunt fighting is not to discover who will win or 'a demonstration of excellence'. It is a staged spectacle acting out society's basic concepts of good and evil, of 'Suffering, Defeat and Justice'. The actors pretending to be wrestlers like characters in a pantomime. They portray grossly-exaggerated stereotypes of human weakness: the traitor, the conceited, and the 'effeminate teddy-boy'. The audience expects to watch them suffer and be punished for their own transgressions of wrestling's rules in a theatrical version of society's ideology of justice.

Saussure's Concept of Meaning:

Saussure was a Swiss linguist and semiotician. According to him language is a system of signs that express ideas. Theory of signs says that signifier and signified make up of signs. A sign is composed of both a material form and a mental concept. The signifier is the material form, i.e., something that can be heard, seen, smelled, touched or tasted, whereas the signified is the mental concept associated with it. According to Saussure, signs of language are arbitrary, in the sense that the relation between their physical and symbolic distinction from each other has no other grounds but convention



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Roland Barthes' Concept of Mythologies:

Differing from the Saussurean view that the connection between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, Barthes argued that this connection, which is an act of signification, is the result of collective contract. Over a period of time, the connection becomes naturalised. In *Mythologies* (1957) Barthes undertook an ideological critique of various products of mass bourgeoisie culture such as soap, advertisement, images of Rome, in an attempt to discover the “universal” nature behind this. **Barthes considers myth as a mode of signification, a language that takes over reality.** The structure of myth repeats the tridimensional pattern, in that myth is a second order signifying system with the sign of the first order signifying system as its signifier.

Explained in our words...

In general, Barthes wanted to create a way for people to deepen their understanding of language, literature, and society. Barthes wanted to make a point that all the signs we see today make up society. The advantage of semiotics in culture lies in the differences between groups.

Example: Red Wine*French national drink*

- viewed as life giving and refreshing in cold weather
- it is associated with all the myths:
 - of becoming warm
 - the height of summer
 - images of shade
 - all things cool and sparkling

Drink of lower social class

- partly because it is seen as blood-like as in Holy Communion
- points out that very little attention is paid to red wine's harmful effects to health



Myth is a type of speech defined more by its intention than its literal sense. Myth also has the character of making “itself look neutral and innocent”. It “naturalises the concept and transforms history into nature”. It deforms and dehistoricises the original connection between the signifier and the signified. The function of myth is to

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- 'empty reality'
- to establish a world "without depth"
- To naturalise history.

Thus the bourgeois presents its own ideas and interests as those of the nation, or as universal.

Barthes illustrates the working of myth with the image of a young Negro soldier saluting the French flag that appeared on the cover of a Parisian magazine. Here the denotation is that the French are militaristic, and the second order signification being that France is a great empire, and all her sons, irrespective of colour discrimination faithfully serve under her flag, and that all allegations of colonialism are false. Thus denotations serve the purpose of ideology, in naturalising all forms of oppression into what people think of as "common sense". The most significant aspect of Barthes' account of myth is his equation of the process of myth making with the process of bourgeois ideologies.