RECOMMENDED READING

All of “Myth Today” and any of the articles which look interesting to you.

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

the signifier, the signified, and the sign
(briefly described) Central relation is always that between the “signifier”
(examples from page 113: roses/black pebble), the “signified” (love/death
sentence), and the sign (roses-of-love/pebble-of-death)

reification
Nature versus History
myth/mythological/mythologist (myth “is a second-order semiological system” in
the signifying chain; the sign at the language level becomes the
“duplicitious” signifier on the mythical level [see pp. 114-115])

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Roland Gerard Barthes [BAH(r)’t] may be described as the best known of
all French semioticians, or analysts of signs. Born in Cherbourg, France on 12
November 1915, he died in Paris on 25 March 1980 from medical
complications after being hit in his automobile by – of all things – a laundry
truck. His childhood was spent at Bayonne. His life was dogged with ill health;
for example, in 1933 he had to temporarily abandon his studies at the University
of Paris when he had his first bout with pulmonary tuberculosis. I could not find
any handy photographs of him, so I drew this picture:
PUT UP TRANSPARENCY OF “BARTHES” [Bart Simpson] HERE
“N’ait Pas Une Vache, Mon Ami” (“Don’t own a cow, my friend”)
Barthes studied French literature and “the classics” (i.e., the canon) at the University of Paris, taking a degree in classical letters in 1939 and another in grammar and philology in 1943.

During his academic career he taught at the Sorbonne and the University of Paris. He taught French in Bucharest, Romania and Alexandria, Egypt. Barthes later joined the prestigious Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (“National Center for Scientific Research,” as best as I can determine) from 1952 to 1959 to further develop his work in sociology and linguistics. In 1962 he became the head of the department of the Sixieme [Seez-yem (6th)] Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, ([A cole prah-treek des-Ot A-tude] Applied School of Advanced Studies) teaching the sociology of signs, symbols, and collective representations. Barthes became a major success in the French structuralist movement of the 1960s, particularly after the Parisian students’ intellectual revolt in May of 1968; he was considered one of the radical students’ most beloved darlings and, naturally, the nemesis of traditional academics (as well as a number of more traditional Marxists, such as Terry Eagleton, mentioned below). In 1976 he taught at the College de France – where he became the first person to hold the chair of literary semiology – and later at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD.

PUBLISHING CAREER

Barthes published over one hundred fifty articles – mostly, it would seem, as a member of the (in)famous Tel Quel (Les Lettres nouvelles) group – and seventeen books during his lifetime. He also wrote for the New Left periodicals Combat, Espirit, and France Observateur, edited Arguments, and helped found the Theatre nouvelle. Among his most famous books:

Writing Degree Zero (Le Degre zero de l’ecriture [Luh dugrree ze-ho du lay cri-ture], 1953; English translation, 1977), which claims that the task of the novel reader is to both wear the mask of the reader and to point out that a mask is being worn (English edition contains an excellent 20-page introduction by Susan Sontag which serves as a description of why Barthes is so hard to read and why he’s so very worth the trouble);

Critical Essays (Essais critiques [S-sais creeteeks], 1964; English translation, 1972) which, like Writing Degree Zero, dealt with language as a system of signs reflecting the assumptions of a given society at a given time;

On Racine (Sur Racine, 1964; English translation, 1964) deals with the characters and settings of Racine’s plays in terms of repeating structures and relations;
Elements of Semiology (Elements de semiologie [Elemonts du sem E O lo zgee], 1965; English translation, 1967), self-explanatory and characteristically self-reflective;

The Empire of Signs (L’Empire des signes [Lum-peer day SEEN-yuh]), dealing with Japanese culture and its signs and symbols as itself a language – Japanese customs as metaphors for writing (1970; English translation, 1982);

S/Z is a rather uncharacteristically humorless, though clever deconstruction of Balzac’s short story “Serrasine” showing the relationship of fragment to fragment and part to part, recommending that we, as Barthes each become more “writerly readers” (1970; English translation, 1974);

The Pleasure of the Text (Le Plaisir du texte [Luh Play Zeeur doo text]) concerns the metaphysical (indeed, erotic) passion between reader and writer with language, imperfections and all, with regard to such matters as semiology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and politics (1973; English translation, 1975) – there also exists a new (Nov 89) interpretation of this book by Armine Kotin Mortimer titled The Gentlest Law [perhaps you were thinking of this, Ben]; it claims to “fix” some of the previous editions’ problems with translation;

Sade, Fourier, Loyola ([Sod, Foy-A, Loy-o-lah] 1975; English translation, 1976), which is an analysis of the text of these three authors as objects of pleasure (note: one reviewer for Choice said this book “is at best obscure, esoteric; at worst contrived and artificial. This is a book of which it may be justly said: What God has put asunder, let no man join together. Recommended for graduate libraries.”);

Barthes finally received considerable international popular success after the publication of his 1975 “anti-autobiography” in which he presents himself as a fiction – a reaction to his utter hatred for the spurious harmony demonstrated in the so-called Realist literature so popular at the time – further explaining his attraction to fragments and brevity (“You have to consider all this to be said by a character in a novel”) titled (in English) Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (translated in 1977);

Fragments d’un discours amoureux (1977) [Frag-mon duhn deez-core ahmoor-OJ], translated into English the next year as A Lover’s Discourse; and Camera Lucida (1981; yet to be wholly translated).

Additionally, The Barthes Reader was compiled and edited by Susan Sontag in 1983. On top of that, perhaps his most famous book of all is Mythologies (1957), discussed in some detail below.

CONCERNING MYTHOLOGIES

As with a good many of his better-known works, Mythologies is a discussion of the way both things and texts mean, how they have come to mean,
and how they show their meaning. This may be clearly demonstrated to have influenced to a large degree French “structuralism.” In as tight a nutshell as I can manage, French structuralism is the investigation of the way the elements of a system (literary, sociological, cultural, whatever) are related.

*Mythologies* is an extension of Barthes’s seemingly boundless interest in language, literature, music, film, linguistics, and painting. It demonstrates his extension of the study of culture to the everyday, to “reading” the common material of culture. “Myths” may be broadly conceived as any message, with a not always immediately recognizable agenda, not always “packaged” as words. From the original Preface to *Mythologies*:

> The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history.... I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse, which, in my view, is hidden there (emphasis original; page 11 of the 1986 Hill and Wang edition).

So Barthes’s work forces one to think of organized and predictable matters which are encountered every single day to be considered as texts which were not created by a single author but by a larger agency which he termed “History.” Gramsci said one must know “thyself as a product of the historical process to date” [324 of *Prison Notebooks*], and Barthes would surely agree. However, while Gramsci maintained that historical process left no inventory, just “an infinity of traces,” Barthes might have argued that the inventory may be found in how we read the texts/contexts/metatexts around us. Language itself is a system of signs – of texts – which reflect the assumptions of a particular society at a particular time. These texts, Barthes argues, must be “read” like a literary text which reproduce a tradition and assumes an audience. If we fail to correctly read these nonlinguistic texts (such as wrestling, striptease, Citroën automobiles, Greta Garbo’s face), we support the enemy (the bourgeois norm) and thus mistake History for Nature (see Solomon’s “Six Principles of Semiotics,” which begin on page 7 of this handout). Even if we cannot find the author of such texts we must recognize their design and intention to create certain effects which determine how and what we, as members of the cultural text/context, think. And the measure by which we may view ourselves and our membership is through our language.
As noted British Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton points out on page 135 of his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Worcester: Billing and Sons [1983]):

Language is Barthes’s theme from beginning to end.... The “healthy” sign ... is one which draws attention to its own arbitrariness – which does not try to palm itself off as “natural” but which ... communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well. The impulse ... is a political one: signs which pass themselves off as natural ... are by that token authoritarian and ideological. .... Ideology seeks to convert culture [what Barthes himself calls “history”] into Nature, and the “natural” sign is one of its weapons. Saluting a flag, or agreeing that Western democracy represents the true meaning of the word “freedom,” become the most obvious, spontaneous responses in the world....

Upon (for me) a third reading of *Mythologies*, one may see that it insists upon – not despite but because of its difficult [read: demanding-upon-the-reader] use of language – the importance of understanding sociocultural texts/contexts so we may avoid confusing the artificial and Historical world humans have constructed for a world which seems Natural, peaceful, and inevitable. Such confusion between Nature and History, Barthes maintained, only serves the interests of the above-mentioned bourgeois norm. He was responsible, along with Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, for much of the structuralist/post-structuralist theory behind what is considered the “new novel” or “antinovel.”

His many allusions to French literature (cf, “The World of Wrestling”) first seem excessive in interpretation and obfuscative in thesis; but that merely serves to support Barthes’s point. “As you read these essays please look,” Barthes seems to say, “not for my theses but for my ‘metatheses’” [a word he, mercifully, never employs]. Interestingly, at times Barthes manages to be rather up front with his methodical madness (see for example footnote 30 in “Myth Today” in which he admits to some trickery: “... finding it painful constantly to work on the evaporation of reality, I have started to make it excessively dense....”).

Barthes’s essays rest upon certain literary devices as a method of analysis. For instance, “the public” (or “spectators”) is a phrase he frequently employs as if, indeed, the public were one thing: a single-minded pack of “readers” whom he – and only he – understands perfectly. What enables him to “get away with it” is his methodology, not his – and only his – overwhelming genius. If we “stand up to him” and refuse to “let him get away with it” we are recognizing his
agenda (and, to be sure, his point). However, to our frequent frustration, he never calls this into question; he makes us figure it out.

That is to say, not only Barthes’s observations on mythic spectacles but his writing on these spectacles may itself be seen as examples of mythic spectacle. They could be read as the spectacle of one who watches and takes possession of the mythological elements which he sees. He is implicated, he becomes a willing co-conspirator (as it were), in the familiar story; he becomes a familiar figure in what may ultimately be considered the petite bourgeois adolescent-male-fantasies he observes and describes.

Consider, for example, what we’ve read in this class already by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz regarding the petite bourgeois adolescent-male-fantasies expressed in his essay on the Balinese cockfight. From the section titled “Saying Something of Something” (pp. 448-453 in The Interpretation of Cultures [New York: Basic Books, 1973]), Geertz says, “For the anthropologist the question is, what does one learn about such principles (of the sociological ordering of a system) from examining culture as an assemblage of texts?” (448).

I would suggest that Barthes would surely say that white men have again taken possession of an aspect of the (“a”?) Third World’s mythological symbols/texts/contexts. Unlike Barthes, Geertz – ever the observant anthropologist – is quite “up front” with his agenda, however: “Deep Play,” he would admit, is intellectual colonialization. The patterns of the cockfights, we – like Barthes – could maintain, are not a reinforcement of the Balinese culture, but a commentary on them.

This is just as Barthes comments on the subjects before “Myth Today.” Wrestling, while dealing with spectacles of suffering and passion, is ultimately about a “History” of justice disguised as Nature. Detergent advertising is ultimately about a Nature of abrasion disguised under a History of the deep, the luxurious, the foamy. Ornamental cooking is History disguised as an artificial Nature.

REVIEW OF MYTHOLOGIES


In these short, spirited essays, Barthes investigates what he calls “petit-bourgeois culture” (what we call “Pop” [I disagree – JAD]). However, beneath the raffish subject matter – “The Face of Garbo,” “The Brain of Einstein,” “Operation Margarine” – a systematic “unmasking” takes place.

.... Barthes is a wily observer of “naturalness” and the “falsely obvious.” A
vivid polemicist (Marx, Freud, and Sartre are part of his well-equipped arsenal), Barthes has something too of the classic artistry of Montaigne.... In methodology he owes an immense debt to Ferdinand de Saussures, the great Swiss linguist who died in 1912, but Saussures could never have imagined the sinuosity of Barthes’s style or the zest of his insights. .... The selections ... are ample, and the translation fine.


Barthes is one of the very few literary critics in any language of whom it can be said that he has never written a bad or uninteresting page.... . [N]either an academic critic, nor a reviewer, but strictly an occasional writer. .... Each of the little essays in this book wrenches a definition out of a common but constructed object, making the object speak its hidden, but ever-so-present reservoir of manufactured sense. .... Barthes’s tools in his discourse are the italic and the telling epithet, startling emphasis where a disguise had been intended.

[no reviewer listed] New Yorker, 09 September 1972, p. 128.

A collection of short essays on the “myths” embodied in popular culture, plus a longer essay in which M. Barthes tells what he thinks myth is. The pieces are very witty, despite the fact that the author’s repeated and humorless attacks on the bourgeoisie take on the quality of a vendetta. He insists that myths are creations of the right, not of the left; as a man of the left, he is resolutely anti-myth. Perhaps he has missed the point: the left is, so to speak, stuck with a myth – the perfectability of man – in which nobody believes. But when M. Barthes is on target – for example, demonstrating the similarities between advertising margarine and peddling obedience or social deference – he is unbeatable: funny and true.

Mark Poster, Library Journal, 01 November 1972, pp. 97-98

First published in France in 1957, Mythologies – a critique of the routine happenings of daily life, such as the Citroën, wrestling, detergents, plastic – expresses, through a semiological method, the exciting fluidity of French structuralism. Barthes did not hesitate to utilize structuralism within the larger conceptual framework of Marxism. He was, let us recall, an editor of Arguments, one of the earliest New Left periodicals. None of that arid formalism that has characterized much structuralist criticism since the mid-1960s, its scholastic, arriviste tone, touches this study which sings with intellectual vibrance. The famous last chapter, “Myth Today,” outlines a program for the analysis of signs, both verbal and nonverbal, that would
uncover the distorted patterns in much of technological society’s communication.

IDEAS ON SEMIOTICS

From Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979):

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign.


... The fact that what I do is called “semiotics” should not frighten anyone. I would still do it if it were called something else [xi].

... I try to interpret and to help others interpret some “signs.” These signs are not only words, or images; they can also be forms of social behavior, political acts, artificial landscapes. As Charles S. Pierce [see below] once said, “A sign is something by knowing which we know something more” [xi].


[Solomon’s] book is about codes and the way that ordinary words, objects, and activities can be signs that point to hidden systems of cultural belief. We usually think of codes a special signaling devices ... (but) the fact is that culture itself is a tissue of codes, a complex system of signs whose meanings may not always lie on the surface [2]. ....

To understand a code is to be able to link its signs – like words or traffic signals – with their meanings [3].

There is a single commanding reason why you should want to learn to think like a semiotician: so you won’t get hoodwinked. .... You can find alternatives to such (hoodwinking) beliefs by employing what [Solomon calls] the Six Principles of Semiotics:

1. Always question the “commonsense” view of things, because “common sense” is really “communal sense”: the
habitual opinions and perspectives of [what Solomon terms] the tribe.

2. The “commonsense” viewpoint is usually motivated by a cultural interest that manipulates our consciousness for ideological reasons.

3. Cultures tend to conceal their ideologies behind the veil of “nature,” defining what they do as “natural” and condemning contrary cultural practices as “unnatural.”

4. In evaluating any system of cultural practices, one must take into account the interests behind it.

5. We do not perceive our world directly but view it through the filter of a semiotic code or mythic frame.

6. A sign is a sort of cultural barometer, marking the dynamic movement of social history [10].

Finally, regarding the history of semiotics and the “Circle of Signs,” Solomon says this:

The modern science of semiotics traces its descent to two late-nineteenth-century philosophers who, working independently of each other, first began to elaborate the conceptual framework on which contemporary semioticians rely. Charles Sanders Peirce [who coined the word “semiotics”], a logician and physicist by training, inaugurated the science of the sign in America, while Ferdinand de Saussure [who termed his science “semiology”], a Swiss linguist and psychologist, worked on the Continent [13-14]. ....

(These thinkers) established the foundation for the fundamental semiotic conviction that the meaning of a sign is not to be found in the object to which it appears to refer but in a concept that functions within a culturally constituted system [14, italics original]. ....

... the meaning of a sign is not to be found in the object to which it appears to refer but in a concept that functions within a culturally constituted system [14].

(The) semiotic definition of the concept (of “dog,” versus “wolf” or “fox”) lies not in some biological entity but in the coils of a conceptual system [14-15]. ....

Semiotic systems ... are self-enclosed codes in which meaning is determined by a movement from a sign to concept rather than
from sign to thing. ... (Semiotic) systems are closed off from any competing views, self-reflexively defining all things only in terms of their own conceptual and ideological beliefs [15].

... A sign system ... forms a kind of frame that determines the shape of our knowledge in advance. As ... Edward Sapir said: “... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” [16].

Semioticians refer to these interpretive frames as “myths.” According to the fifth semiotic principle [see above], a myth is not a fanciful story but a code that informs an entire structure of belief [16].