

Introduction: Barthes's relevance today

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was one of the leading scholars who developed semiotics into an academic discipline and gave it intellectual credibility in the latter half of the 20th century. Barthes's theoretical reflection and analytical case-studies covered a vast field. His work on theory was based on Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev, but his texts refer also to Roman Jakobson, Sigmund Freud, the Ancient philosophers and rhetoricians, and even to Charles S. Peirce. In case-studies, he focused on topics as diverse as, for example, toys, cars, cinema, photography, cities, fashion, and literature, which remained central all through his career. It is fair to say that Barthes's importance for semiotics is matched only by few exceptional figures, such as Juri Lotman, Umberto Eco, and Algirdas J. Greimas.

However, Barthes has a peculiar position in the pantheon of semiotics. Firstly, as a criticizer of myths, he might have wanted to deconstruct evaluations that lift few scholars above others and to show how interpretations are motivated first and foremost by the historical context of reception and the power structures that prevail in it. He argued that there is no privileged meta-language that could not be superseded by another language, distributing the material according to new distinctions, and this holds also for our contemporary interpretation of his work. In Barthes's analysis, "pantheon" of any science might have turned out to be just another bourgeois myth.

Secondly, Barthes was an elusive thinker, not building just one theory and not interested in working out in detail the consequences of his arguments, but rather keen on pursuing theorizing as an open process according to the questions and problems that the empirical cases presented to his critical gaze. As a result, it is not always clear how many Barthes there actually are and how their mutual relationships should be understood. It has been asked whether Barthes the

essayist resists time better than Barthes the theoretician and also of which theoretician one is actually talking about: the structural or the textual one? The temptation to make distinctions between Barthes's different aspects and periods is strong.

After Barthes's death in 1980, there seemed to be a tendency to play down his scientific work and to emphasize his value as a literary author, that is, as a brilliant essayist, a master of the fragment and a renovator of the genre of autobiography. Support was searched for in his own writings, and especially in his late expressions of the *fatigue* he felt towards the modern experimental writing he had been introducing and defending in France. However, we now know that until the very end he also openly claimed to have remained a semiotician, which for him meant methodological work with and on oppositions, codes and their articulations. The very same elements had earlier provided him the theoretical means for the defence and interpretation of the literary experimentations of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers and other contemporary writers. If Barthes distanced himself from the avant-garde literary disputes he had alimanted earlier, he argued for his case with the same methods and concepts he had been using before.

In his posthumously published Collège de France lecture course on the neuter, Barthes defined semiotics, or *sémiologie*, as “*écoute ou vision des nuances*” (“listening to or vision of nuances”, Barthes 2002a: 37). The methods and concepts of semiotics were for him first of all tools for the exploration of differences in signification. This meant also an active work of interpretation. Barthes did not venture into interviewing informants and establishing statistical evidence for the social significations he was analysing, but rather exposed different possibilities of interpretation that he saw as available, behaving more like Faust than an ordinary laboratory scientist and occasionally even at the risk of “*bêtise*” (Ette 2002; Marty 2006: 125–139). If we consider literature as an interpretation of socially and culturally significant reality, as a means to semiotize and to inquire what is already semiotized, then it is clear that semiotics in Barthes's understanding of the word did not stand in opposition to literature, but rather was the necessary way to access it, the approach that had to be incessantly developed further in order to be capable of attaining the complexities of signification that are typical for literature and constitute a large part of its cultural value.

It is thus possible to argue that literature (or writing, *écriture*) and theoretical research were necessary companions to each other in

Barthes's work, and that no abusive hierarchization should be established between them. Furthermore, it has been claimed that the linguistic inventions and figures Barthes developed in his specific, more literary than traditionally scientific way of writing were actually for him the means to do philosophical research (Milner 2003; see also Marty 2006: 9–17). There was a nurturing and inspiring relation between theory and literature in his work, and research has to take both into consideration. Barthes's insightful analyses and challenging theories only exist accompanied with his literary work on language and discourse, and vice versa.

Research today can profit from the posthumous publication of the lecture courses Barthes held at the Collège de France. The three volumes present Barthes's reflections on the neuter (Barthes 2002a), on communal forms of living (Barthes 2002b) and on the writing of a novel (Barthes 2003). They have been edited respecting the unfinished nature of the manuscripts, showing Barthes's original notes as well as the omissions and precisions he made in lecturing. Barthes himself considered his appointment to the Collège de France as marking the beginning of a new era in his life, one consecrated even more fully than before to literature and especially to the project of writing a novel. Consequently, scholars have often focused on the last period from this angle. Arguments have been presented for and against about whether the novel project was a failure or a success and about terms in which it should be understood (see for example Compagnon 2002, Knight 2002). This interest in Barthes the author was obviously spurred already by his autobiographical writings in the 1970's and the posthumous book *Incidents* (Barthes 1987). It is not exaggerated to say that he counts today as one of the important French authors of the latter half of the 20th century. On the other hand, Barthes's theoretical works from the earlier periods are still instrumental for general reflections on literature (see for example the discussions on Barthes in Culler 2007 and Compagnon 1998). In teaching semiotics, Barthes's early *Mythologies* (1957), despite the 51 years that separate the present from their publication, is hardly superseded as an introduction to critical social-semiotic analysis. The same holds for his essays on images and music.

Barthes's signification for today's research is thus strong and varied. He is a classic in semiotics and literary studies, read as one of the main historical figures in these fields. But he is also a continuously inspiring, challenging and even provoking thinker whose heritage is far from being fully elucidated. The articles in this special issue

explore Barthes's relevance for semiotics, literary studies, musicology and cultural studies, proposing novel ways to read his works and connecting them to questionings and analyses that are pertinent to contemporary research. The key idea has been to apply Barthes's thinking in novel ways and to look for unnoticed continuities or connections in his works, pursuing reflection rather than stopping for reconstruction. The fact that the writers' affiliations range from semiotics to literary studies, French studies and cultural studies, already reflects Barthes's importance 28 years after his death. All the texts are based on presentations given at the international symposium "Barthes Relevance Today" held at the University of Helsinki Institute for Art Research in December 13, 2007.

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