

On myths and fashion: Barthes and cultural studies

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Abstract. Roland Barthes's work has confronted contemporary culture with the question of what happens when an object turns into language. This question allowed Barthes to "construct" well known cultural objects — from novels to music, from images to classical rhetoric, from love to theatre — in an unthought way, and to create new, even more unknown ones — from contemporary myth to fashion, from Japan to food culture. In this paper, Barthes's cultural criticism is considered alongside with the issues raised by Cultural Studies. More specifically, Barthes's constant reflection on the myth undoubtedly entitles us to connect his cultural criticism to the work that, in those same years, was being produced by the English forge of Cultural Studies, namely the so-called "Birmingham school". Even today, Barthes's work makes it possible for semiotics to be, to use his expressions, both "the science of every imagined universe", and a *mathesis singularis*, rather than *universalis*, that is to say a systematic way to approach the singularity of the objects of knowledge. On the basis of this "transcendental reduction", we can therefore wish for a "second birth" and a transvaluation of linguistics and of semiotics, both to be applied through varied and disseminated forms of intellectual activism.

What happens when a garment, a dish or a car turns into language? When a photo strikes us with a meaning that we perceive in a neglected, secondary and even obtuse "corner"? When a sport event or the face of a star give rise to an epic narration? When a distant land and language are conveyed through writing? When a love discourse unravels through fragments?

These are but a few questions with which Roland Barthes confronted the entire contemporary culture and to which he already provided an answer, in his texts, just by making their formulation possible. Such questions constructed well known cultural objects — from novels to music, from images to classical rhetoric, from love to theatre — in an unknown way, and at the same time he created new, even more unknown, cultural objects — from contemporary myth to fashion, from Japan to food culture. Barthes established a style in both humanities and social sciences. When, in his writings of the 1950s and 1960s, he elaborated some applications of the theories of European linguistic structuralism — by Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev in the first place — he did it in a systematic, rigorous and almost maniacal way. But the field of “practical” application he chose was the seemingly futile systems such as the Fashion “described” in specialized magazines, through which he was able to show the exemplary workings of social signifying systems. Those same systems that he had well portrayed in his work *Mythologies* (Barthes 1974b [1957]), whose 50th anniversary falls this year and which treated, as he said, collective representations of mass culture as sign-systems.

Therefore a simple sign, such as the cover photo of a magazine of the 1950s (*Paris Match*), portraying a black soldier saluting the French flag, becomes a “form” capable of displaying an idea, or even an ideology: namely that of France, just before the Algerian revolution, with all the rhetoric of her colonial *grandeur*, claiming to keep together different people without any colour discrimination (Barthes 1974b: 198). The myth is thus deconstructed and unveiled, but it is also grasped in its ability to fascinate: Barthes manages to turn the *Tour de France*, the face of Greta Garbo, the strip-tease, the Citroën DS and even plastic, into sublime containers of the effect produced by any myth, which occurs at the crossroad between believing, making believe and wanting to believe. What a lot of material the contemporary world would offer him for his mythologies! How vast was his ability to look at the future anterior!

But what fabric are myths made of?

It is not simply the same stuff that dreams are made of, to paraphrase Shakespeare and Sam Spade. Myth, says Barthes, is a “second-order semiological system” (Barthes 1974b: 196). It is produced by its “semioclastic” dismantling and, at the same time, by presenting itself through traces, fragments, singular and obtuse

interstices that allow it to resonate. Myth, if recognized as such, establishes the ideological critique of the language of the so called mass culture, meant as “stolen language”, as mystifying transformation of the cultural into the natural, of petty-bourgeois culture into universal nature. But, at the same time, myth is also “speech”, that is to say a form, a signifying system subject to the laws of a discourse. A myth is not an object, but an object converted into language.

According to Barthes semiology is a science of forms, unlike those human sciences that can be defined as sciences of values — such as psychoanalysis, psychology or some types of literary criticism. That is to say, it does not look “behind” facts, but rather looks at their structures. There are, says Barthes, some “forms of life”, some “forms of ideas”, that are defined as such precisely by virtue of the values that they contain. “Mythology” studies precisely these “ideas-in-form” (Barthes 1974b: 199–200). Since Barthes first wrote about it, this science has been greatly needed, as the powerful development of mass communication and the presence of infinite old and new communication rites confirm that it is hard to find places or fields deprived of social meaning. Barthes’s original and foundational idea of not considering the myth in the classical, “archaic” or “traditional” context alone, and certainly also the idea of opposing the *mythologies* to Lévi-Strauss’ *mythologiques*, gave semiotics the possibility to establish itself as a social science, as critical sociosemiotics that can face the complexity of the present. Barthes quotes the example of himself before the sea, in itself a “simply” natural element. But as soon as we think of the sea as “beach”, the mythical material — or sociosemiotic material, we might say — appears through various types of signs, such as flags, slogans, signals, sign-boards, clothes, even suntan (Barthes 1974b: 194n.).

Giving account of the myth, Barthes cannot feel “estranged” from it, as his own position is shrouded in the intellectual fascination that the myth exerts. Sociosemiotic analysis, according to Barthes, can deconstruct it, but cannot demythify it, because the myth itself is an operational concept, it is the very condition of the possibility of social imagery. He made it explicit ten years after the *Mythologies*, in the *Fashion System* (1970 [1967]), when he analysed “described” fashion in specialized magazines as a realized myth, a structure of meaning organized through the functioning of a social discourse. In this analysis, he evoked the possibility for linguistics to address the

“countless objects that inhabit and comprise the image-system of our time” (Barthes 1970: xvi) and become “by a second birth, the science of every imagined universe” (Barthes 1970: xvi).

However, as he has warned us in his *Elements of Semiology*, such reborn linguistics is not “quite that of the linguist” (Barthes 1974a: 14). It is a kind of linguistics that elaborates a “poetic project”, as he later retrospectively defined it in *The Fashion System*, consisting in creating an intellectual object out of nothing, or very little, in fabricating under the reader’s eyes, little by little, an intellectual object emerging progressively in its complexity, in its overall relations. This multiplication of universes allows a possibility of a sort of transcendental reduction in a phenomenological sense, which Barthes recognized many years after the *Mythologies* and *The Fashion System*, in his book on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980). Why — he asked himself in this text — mightn’t there be a new science for every object? A *mathesis singularis* and no longer *universalis*? A systematic approach to the singularity of the objects of knowledge, allowing a full involvement of the inquiring “gaze”, and always taking into account, or looking for, the risk of being wounded, involved, touched?

The myth always requires to be heard. Hearing means grasping its nuances, resonating together, exceeding the approximate and stereotyped knowledge of *endoxa*, through knowledge, a *savoir* which is also *saveur*, “flavour”. If *endoxa* is the “mythical” in communication, the “flavour of the myth” is to be found beyond communication. The myth is not simplistically the “bad thing” that has to be eliminated, the distorted material of ideology. On the contrary, myth, inasmuch as it is connected to its own discursivization, as well as to imagination, to fantasy, which makes its systematic quality possible, exerts a peculiar, we might even say obtuse fascination on the inquirer. In this sense, mythological analysis, while producing the objects and the models for cultural criticism, resists every possible institutionalization, even the one that places the “critic” in a defined social or academic role. In Barthes there has always been a tension to overcome his own position as “analyst” who tries not to become neither the scholar of social sciences, uninvolved in his “object”, nor the self-referential critic who becomes his own parody. In *The Fashion System* he made it clear by stating that “the semiologist is a man who expresses his own future death in the very terms in which he has named and understood the world” (Barthes 1970: 296).

Barthes's constant reflection on the myth undoubtedly entitles us to connect his cultural criticism to the work that in those same years was being produced by the English forge of cultural studies, more precisely the so-called "Birmingham school". Stuart Hall (2006a [1981]) wrote that cultural studies drew inspiration from two theoretical paradigms. On one side there is "culturalism" as such (with authors like Williams, Hoggart and Thompson) that was inspired by Marxism and focused on the description of culture as an activity woven into all social practices and forms of life. The second paradigm is that of "structuralist" inspiration (*via* Goldmann, Althusser, Lévi-Strauss) which paid attention to the internal *relations* of the practices that produce social meanings (Hall 2006a: 85). In regard to his background, Barthes should be placed in the second paradigm; but his position is clearly more complex and reaches beyond the limits of structuralism *tout-court* (this is why the label of "post-structuralism" was used also for Barthes, a label renowned in the North-American context, but less "fortunate" elsewhere, such as in Italy). Therefore the link between Barthes's cultural criticism and Cultural Studies goes beyond these same paradigms and can be found rather between the lines and in the margins than in rigid readings both of Barthes and of Cultural Studies.

As Hall writes, cultural studies see culture as the "actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society" (Hall 2006b: 224). "Culture" in this case assumes the Gramscian meaning of "popular culture", whose "diffused and dispersed" features make up common sense. Gramsci, whom Cultural Studies explicitly refer to, wrote that common sense is to be mostly found in folklore (understood precisely as popular culture, Gramsci 1929–1935: 90), journalism, literature, especially popular literature and proverbs¹. These are areas of semiotic production *par excellence* because they are made of language, images, customs, figurations and narrations of "facts"; they are areas where myths are born, grow and reproduce. Myths are ambivalent, as Barthes teaches us. And common sense is ambivalent as well: it is "ambiguous, contradictory and multiform", according to Gramsci (1929–1935: 1399). Sometimes it can be interpreted not only as conformist, stereotyped and repetitive but also, on the contrary, as "good sense", that is,

¹ Barthes (1974b: 233) also writes: "Myths tend towards proverbs".

the ability to identify the “exact cause, simple and to hand”, accompanied to “a certain measure of experimentalism”, and the ability to observe reality directly (Gramsci 1929–1935: 1334–1335). Therefore, in an ambivalent way, common sense codifies dominant values, but at the same time it is also able to express new ones.

Barthes’s notion of myth introduces a complex, semiotic vision of what we call “ideology”. Even for Gramsci ideology was not simply the static structure of a dominant thought, but also the strength capable of creating the “terrain on which men [*sic*] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (Gramsci 1929–1935: 869). The semiotician and philosopher Ferruccio Rossi-Landi owes much to this Gramscian sense of ideology. He distinguished between ideology conceived as mere “false thought” and ideology as “social planning”, meant as a sign structure, both verbal and non-verbal (Rossi-Landi 2005 [1978]). According to Rossi-Landi, we must differentiate between “programs of communication”, based on conservative ideologies of human alienation, and “social plannings” as the carriers of developing and transforming ideologies. The former mask their own discourses as non-ideological, thus giving rise to myths that claim to present some historically determined contents as extra-historical (Rossi-Landi 2005: 349), that is to say as natural and universal. The latter are permeated with the criticism of the already-given and are oriented towards open endings. Barthes’ myths are located between these two meanings — a conservative and an innovative one — of ideology. And the persistent oscillation between the two also shows the instability of the boundaries between “popular culture”, with its heroic epic of the myth, and “mass culture”, the product of the “bourgeois as an anonymous society” (Barthes 1974b: 218).

Barthes’s “semioclasism”, just like cultural studies, has revolutionized the study of culture, by removing any biased hierarchy between “high” and “low”, and including in the concept of “culture” even what English cultural studies at a certain point called “subcultures” (Hebdige 1983 [1979]). In this sense an article by Barthes on hippies, written in 1969 and published in *Communications*, seems extremely relevant. In *A Case of Cultural Criticism* (2006 [1969]) Barthes observes hippies in a peripheral context, rather than in “capital cities” like San Francisco or New York. From the standpoint of a provincial European city where hippies of various origins gather, Barthes describes them as contradictory figures. This contradiction is detected

through elements that may be defined as stylistic, that is to say aiming at grasping the “difference”, the “gap” between the hippie life style and the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois world. Barthes identifies several oppositions: collective eating opposed to individual meals; roaming opposed to fixed abode; poor cleanliness in opposition to the American myth of hygiene; the confusion of the characterizing features of gender (hair, clothes and jewels) in opposition to the “natural” demarcation of the two sexes (Barthes 2006: 125). Moreover, Barthes considers the hippie clothing as the specific marked sign of a group, expressed in two forms, sometimes even co-present: on one hand, there is an unbridled imagination (flowers everywhere, brocades, tapestry cloaks); on the other, the “indiscreet borrowing of local costumes” (*djellabas*, Hindu tunics dresses, veils) as Barthes calls it (Barthes 2006: 125). The clothed body is therefore recognised as a distinguishing feature of hippy culture, one that can be considered as the symbol of a life style, as we would call it today, that is to say those tastes, common sense, ideology and values shared within a social group that are aestheticized and are therefore mainly expressed through visual semiotics. From the inside (in a Lotmanian sense) of hippie culture, these signs are not at all perceived as “fashion”. In fact, hippies explicitly rejected the institution of fashion as a bourgeois system. But from the outside of hippie semiosphere (always in a Lotmanian sense), it is evident that it was a form of fashion, meant in a wider sense as the manifestation of a complexity of tensions, meanings and values that are not only confined to the vestimentary dimension (Calefato 2007: 13).

Barthes sees a reactive force in hippies — in a Nietzschean sense (Barthes 2006: 126). “If only hippies put a little more intelligence in their adventure and research”, wrote Barthes, they “could be one of the prefigurations of the *Übermensch* (*Overman*), the one that Nietzsche ascribed to the last of the nihilists” (Barthes 2006: 126). Nietzsche’s “active nihilism” allows the possibility of a transvaluation of all values, up to the point of making their positive “recovery” impossible. Barthes rightly detected this potentiality of transvaluation in the hippie movement (a potentiality that, in the following decade was to be expressed in Europe by punk culture, though in a totally different form), and he also recognized some historical reincarnations of nihilism, such as Christ and Buddha, in hippie symbols. However, the limit of what might be called “imperfect nihilism” was precisely

its cultural relativism. If, says Barthes, in the United States the hippie was really a reactive figure, in that his cultural protest clashed with the “good consciousness” of the rich, elsewhere the distinguishing features of the hippie movement (poorness, frugal meals, common houses, rag clothes) were not “forces that helped fighting against the plethora of goods, but material forces that had to be fought” (Barthes 2006: 127). Besides, we have to consider that one of the essential myths of this movement, namely the East, was nothing but the product of the Orientalist vision (Said 1978) typical of imperialism. Such values as pacifism, Buddhism, the aspiration to the “trip”, meant both as “hallucination” and as a real trip to the East, risked losing the authenticity through which they were shared and perceived within hippie culture, thus becoming petty-bourgeois values themselves.

In this way Barthes points out the distance between cultural and political criticism, but at the same time he criticizes the limits inherent in both of them. The first one runs the risk of following practices of cultural narcissism, assuming symbols that are no longer “reactive”, in the Nietzschean sense, that are no longer a “game” (“highest form of symbolic activity”), but counterfeiting (Barthes 2006: 127). The second is not able to detach itself from intellectualism. “The militant keeps living as petty-bourgeois, the hippie as *reversed* bourgeois” (Barthes 2006: 128). Let’s remember that it was the year 1969. The atmosphere of May 1968 was still alive, especially in France, and as Barthes wrote in the article *Mythology Today*, published in *Esprit* in 1971, any student was then able to demystify and to demythify the forms of life, thought and consumption peculiar to mass society. But demythification had become, on its turn, a sort of catechesis and a figure of discourse (Barthes 1988 [1984]: 66).

We know well that in the history of the growing cultures (subcultures) of the second half of the 20th century, especially after punk, everything has been absorbed and re-contextualized within the reproductive logics of fashion and leisure wear industry. In the 1990s, for instance, precisely the punk was “sublimated” by Gianni Versace in a famous collection in which an evening black dress covered with safety pins — albeit studded with diamonds — stood out. And today we are witnessing a hippie revival, *mainstream* and “heroic”, expressed through the 1960s vintage fashion, in different fields: clothes, interior design, cinema, advertising, design, graphics, music,

and so on. In the postmodern context, therefore, the ever-present risk is that “cultural criticism” may become itself a myth.

But society is still filled with a growing amount of languages woven with habits, repetitions, stereotypes, set patterns, and keywords. Their alienation still requires demythification, which already back in 1970, Barthes sought to achieve by including the myth into a general theory of language that should be applied wherever stories are told — that is to say wherever discursivity is found: from interior language to conversation, from newspaper articles to political sermons, from novels to advertising (Barthes 1988: 65–68). Barthes called this semiotic practice “idiolectology” and its main keywords are “citation, reference, stereotype” (Barthes 1988: 67). The other possible names for this practice used by Barthes include “second birth” of linguistics described in *The Fashion System* (Barthes 1970), or the *mimesis singularis* in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1980).

About 15 years after the *Mythologies*, Barthes realized that the science of mythology was now part of common sense: it had become *endoxa*, that is to say an approximate knowledge, with its own mythological features. Today, on the contrary, it is no longer true that demythification is a form of diffused knowledge, a common sense: actually, today more than ever, the myth exerts its primary function, that is to say to naturalize the social, the cultural, the ideological and history, through an *endoxa* that, though no longer transmitted through firmly established great narratives, keeps reproducing as stereotyped and trivializing knowledge. Now more than ever, there is the need for a sociosemiotics that would draw inspiration both from Barthes’s theoretical indications and from the cultural criticism that he fostered, together with cultural studies. It could introduce a method that would not perform the demythification through a naïve “unmasking” or “rightening” of contemporary mythical discourse, but through the generation of paths “crossing” the semiotic matter, paths that would explicit the social discourses that produce its values and where new objects of research could be produced. As it was for myths and fashion, “a second birth” of linguistics and of semiotics is therefore to be hoped for: more generally, a transvaluation of humanities realized through multiple and disseminated forms of intellectual activism. This

could be Barthes's legacy to our times, his contribution to the rebirth of a new cultural criticism today.²

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² Translated from Italian by Angela D'Ottavio.

О мифах и о моде: Барт и культурология

Ролан Барт задал современной культуре вызывающий вопрос: что случится, если объект становится языком? Этот вопрос позволил Барту «конструировать» невиданным образом известные объекты культуры (от романов до музыки, визуальных образов, классической риторики, любви и театра), а также создавать новые, неизвестные объекты.

Данная статья рассматривает бартовскую критику культуры в связи с проблемами, возникшими в области культурологии. Постоянные размышления Барта на тему мифа несомненно позволяют связать его критику культуры с идеями современной ему английской культурологии, точнее, с бирмингемской школой. И в наше время именно бартовское творчество позволяет семиотике быть, если пользоваться словами Барта, «наукой всех возможных миров» и *mathesis singularis* (не *universalis*), то есть быть систематическим модусом для рассматривания особенностей объектов знания. На базе этой «трансцендентальной редукции» мы можем надеяться на «возрождение» и переоценку лингвистики и семиотики благодаря их применению в разных формах интеллектуальной деятельности.

Müütidest ja moest: Barthes ja kultuuri-uuringud

Roland Barthes on esitanud kaasaegsele kultuurile väljakutsuva küsimuse: mis juhtub siis, kui objektist saab keel? See küsimus võimaldas Barthes'il "konstrueerida" seniolematul viisil tuntud kultuuriobjekte (romaanidest muusika, visuaalsete kujutiste ja klassikalise retoorika, armastuse ning teatrini välja) ning luua ka uusi, senitundmata objekte kaasaegsetest müütidest moe, Jaapani ja söögikultuurini välja.

Käesolev artikkel käsitleb Barthes'i kultuurikriitikat seoses kultuuri-uuringute valdkonnas esilekerkinud probleemidega. Barthes'i pidevad mõtisklused müüdi teemadel lubavad tema kultuurikriitikat kahtlemata seostada oma kaasaegse Inglismaa kultuuri-uuringute, täpsemini selle Birminghami koolkonna, ideedega. Ka tänapäeval on just Barthes'i looming see, mis võimaldab semiootikal olla "kõigi võimalike universumite teadus" — kui kasutada Barthes'i enda sõnu — ja *mathesis singularis* (mitte *universalis*), see tähendab, olla süstemaatiline moodus teadmise objektide erilise käsitlemiseks. Nimetatud "transsendentaalne reduktsioon" annab lootust lingvistika ja semiootika "uuestisünniks" ning ümberhindamiseks tänu nende rakendamisele mitmesugustes intellektuaalse tegevuse vormides.

