

QUESTION EVERYTHING

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Roland Barthes's collection of essays *Mythologies* can be best described as an elucidator. Barthes's work is the equivalent to wearing infrared goggles in the dark. He reveals to the reader things that have previously gone unnoticed. The means by which Barthes makes these figurative goggles accessible is, of course, through words rather than any physical device. That being said, it is through the written word that Barthes often illuminates the world's devices. What I mean by that is, the primary foci of Barthes's essays are devices: objects, actions, things. By exploring how these staples of society are used, Barthes lends insight into their users and the unnoticed ways in which they use these devices.

"Here is the schema of this new demonstration," opens Barthes in one of his short essays ("Operation Astra" 41). The word "here" seems a rather insignificant one, but it emerges abnormally often in Barthes's work. In fact, his essays are splattered with it: "[h]ere, initially, we find many fewer Chinese girls and Spanish señoritas," "The toy here delivers the catalog of everything the grown-up does not find surprising," "[h]ere we find an emphasis which must have been that of the ancient theaters" ("Striptease" 167, "Toys" 59, "In the Ring" 3). Here. Here. Here. The ubiquity of this word is not just a reflection of Barthes's writing tendencies. It is a display of his intentions as a thinker. The word "here" is didactic, directive, and engaging. It's the type of word you'd commonly hear in college lecture halls, and that is entirely the point. Barthes's writing reads like lectures that have been transcribed in real time; his rambling sentences are simply the byproduct of thoughtful oration. A reader feels as if he has been plopped into a classroom, which is precisely where Barthes wants his readers to be: sitting quiet in their seats, eyes wide, so that he can address them from his podium—"[h]ere is how you are deceived! This is what you should be looking for!" In his study of devices, he is indeed trying to teach his audience the functions of such devices that they don't detect.

One such example of a device with undetected functions comes in Barthes's essay "Toys." Common perception may be that toys are just objects for play, devices that promote creativity. But Barthes, as in all his essays, shatters this widespread belief. He writes of French toys as objects that "*literally* prefigure the universe of adult functions" through their embodiment of things like the army, the post office, schools and hairdressers: all the "techniques of modern adult life" ("Toys" 59). The prevalence of such techniques thrusts a child into adult life and renders him as one who "cannot constitute himself as anything but an owner, a user, never as a creator" (60). The child is thus taught to accept the properties of the adult world—never to invent, only to replicate. In the essay "Striptease," Barthes follows a similar pattern of deducing the function of devices, this time dashing the notion that stripping sexualizes women. Through "eroticism that displaces the body to realms of legend"—clothing bedizened with diamonds and sequins which defends the woman "like a sword of chastity and definitely repels the woman into a mineral universe"—Barthes finds the Parisian stripper stripped of her sexuality because she is made unattainable ("Striptease" 165, 166).

Barthes's pattern of busting misconceptions reveals a treatment of devices beyond the tangible. If he were to treat a toy as just a plastic construct, and a striptease strictly as the physical removal of clothing, all of his deductions would be unreachable; furthermore, he would not have presented his students with a general means of extracting the hidden functions of the devices. Barthes must, and indeed does, treat all devices as symbols. Thus he allows himself to interpret their functions, their influences on their users, and their means of manipulation. He takes material objects and converts them into representations of the theoretical. Through this conversion he is granted the license to apply semiotics to his natural habitat, to treat the world as if it were a storybook, and to investigate all words of significance to the book's story.

This abstract application of semiotics, in the realm of the physical rather than the written, is why Barthes's book received the title *Mythologies*. Mythologies are collections of myths, and a myth is defined as "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon" ("myth"). Each of his essays accordingly presents a symbol within society and an inquiry into its meaning. Indeed,

each is a semiotic story told of how, for example, a thing like a toy can restrict those it is meant to empower. The devices in question in Barthes's essays are, by loose definition, myths, for they reveal human phenomena. Yet, they are also myths because they are "misrepresentation[s] of the truth" ("myth"). Barthes's investigations are, by deduction, revealers of truths, truths often-times overlooked by us.

One can't help but wonder what motivates this obsessive scholar of semiotics standing behind the podium. Of course misconception is something that should be eradicated, and the understanding of truth should be an aim of inestimable value. But are his chosen words of the world's storybook really of great significance? Isn't the value of a striptease or a toy inestimably low in the grand scheme of things? Barthes's titles—"The New Citroën," "Ornamental Cuisine," "Steak-Frites," "The Jet-Man"—reveal a fixation with the seemingly trivial. Why does Barthes bother to teach his students of the hidden functions, the unknown truths, of things like a new French car line?

Barthes wrote his collection of essays between 1954 and 1956, a time during which a populist party came onto the French political scene (Roth). The Poujadist party's "enemies were . . . metropolitan elites" and their "propaganda peddled a coded anti-Semitism" (Shields 21, 25). Their racism and anti-intellectualism posed a great worry to Barthes, and their popularity posed a further concern: his countrymen were ignorant enough to blindly follow the party's offensive beliefs. Thus Barthes's criticism is not a means of degrading his peers, a way of proving his knowledge and the common man's ignorance. It is more analogous to the methods of Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*, who forces his pupil to wash his car so that the pupil will master those circular hand motions and later be able to use them in important karate fights. Through countless investigations of one object or another, Barthes drills the method of semiotic deduction into the mind of his audience, instilling the capacity to think critically and discern truth, so that when the real threats of deception arise, like prominent parties with dangerous beliefs, his countrypeople will no longer take the bait.

Within Barthes's essays lie many more exercises in the examination of ordinary devices. For instance, he demonstrates how wine, being a "product of an expropriation," causes us to feel morally ambiguous about a substance

meant to “provide a collective morality” (“Wine and Milk” 82, 81). But with a sharp eye, the reader can begin to perceive how Barthes’s essays are more relevant to his political narrative. Barthes writes of the Astra margarine advertisements that begin with an “indignant cry against margarine,” only to later soothe, ensuring that “margarine is a delicious nourishment . . . [and] always useful” (“Operation Astra” 42). He employs what he calls a “vaccine”—a prick of negativity that, once absorbed by the public, renders them immune from any other flaws present in, say, Astra margarine. He provides insight not only into the advertising tactics of margarine, but the “vaccine” tactic present in the army and the church: “[t]he Army an ideal value? Unthinkable! . . . The Church infallible? Unfortunately that’s very doubtful . . . [But] [w]hat are those minor clinkers within any Order compared to its advantages?” (“Operation Astra” 42-3). Barthes begins to show how seemingly benign deceptions, once perceived, can extend their span far beyond the matter originally at hand: to arenas of utmost concern such as religion and the military.

In one of his final essays, Barthes’s explores the myth of plastic and our attraction to it. Barthes writes: “[Plastic] is an essentially alchemical substance . . . [its] very idea [is] infinite transformation” (“Plastic” 193). We are attracted to it not because of its function, say, as good Tupperware, but rather because its functions are so numerous—it can be used for everything, and made into anything; indeed, it can replace nature itself as the source for our devices. “Plastic is wholly swallowed up in the fact of being used: ultimately, objects will be invented for the sole pleasure of using them,” Barthes continues, rather frightened (195). For if in plastic resides both the capability to create anything and for countless devices to be created, then so does the possibility to be infinitely deceived. Even “contemporary toys,” he notes, “are made of unpromising materials, products of chemistry” (“Toys” 60). Wine, too, “possesses apparently plastic powers” (“Wine and Milk” 80). Plastic seems to be the test Barthes leaves his students with, hinted at throughout his essays. In this embodiment of infinite possibility is the potential for innumerable myths, and thus, the incarnation of all of Barthes’s fears.

Barthes’s *Mythologies* turns out to be a lesson on truths and further, a revelation of how we are to discern myth and discover truth for ourselves. It is a work of infinite relevance, for we live in a world that will constantly deceive.

And thus, we will always need those infrared goggles. But if we are to be good students of Barthes, and act in a manner he would approve of, then we must be wary of them, too. Where do they come from? Do we consider them to be good because they grant us power? Are we cheating nature once again by making light of complex darkness? If we are to truly wear Barthes's infrared goggles, even if they are only figurative, we must consider all of these questions—indeed, question the teacher who taught us to question everything else, unpack the mythic goggles, and ascertain whether they are of use in or a hindrance to pursuing truths. Only then can we proceed to use them.

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