

**Explanation of "Myth Today"
from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies***

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This is a light effort at explaining the core ideas of the essay "Myth Today," which closes out his little book *Mythologies*. It is not going to be paragraph by paragraph explanation, I only want to cover the basic ideas. (Thus, I skip such as the small discussion about the necessary abstraction of any scientific approach: something which adds to the overall discussion, but is not necessary to the basic ideas.)

The Context

I have seen a lot of people get "Myth Today" wholly wrong, including a lot of scholarly work. They recognize that *Mythologies* was something of a ground-breaking work of cultural criticism, and want to tap into its fame, but too often fail to understand the complexities of his ideas here. Nor do they seem to understand that very little of this book still exists in the language of contemporary semiology: this book is a one-time exploration of a linguistic event. The ideas within *Mythologies* have since and elsewhere been discussed by others in different terminology, from different approaches, and to different results.

Much of the error in usage I have seen lies in that the essay is read as though it is a general essay on semiology, which it is not. Or they read it as mainline semiology, which it is not. It is an early observational essay in semiology about a particular *and contemporary* event in language. Also, this is not a statement about "myth" as such Joseph Campbell uses the word. Indeed, I have never come across

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this particular usage of the word *myth* except in relation to this book (which, I believe, is part of the point, since "myth" as such a Campbell and Eliade use the word is in a kind of *functional opposition* to "myth" as Barthes is describing). This essay is social commentary, a statement on how cultural thinking has *become something less* than mythic in the more quotidian sense, has become something *less alive*, and the language chosen works to that end.[FN] This book is, after all, as Barthes states in the Preface, "an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass-culture."

[FN] That is a problematic statement, as the language which Barthes is describing has never not been, nor, arguably, in the cultural domain, never not been the dominant modality of thought. But in the context of the moment, Barthes is saying that the other mythical thinking has been greatly reduced because of consumerist mass-culture.

For example, the opening sentence: *What is myth, today?* The context – and the irony inherent – is already established. If you need more, though, the opening sentence on the very next page (page 110 in the 1972 HarperCollins edition, Annette Lavers, trans.):

Naturally, everything is not expressed at the same time: some objects become *the prey* of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear [. . .]. (emphasis mine)

Seems rather obvious that the approach is not neutral, that "mythical speech" is not here being considered as a cultural positive. And then, at the end of the paragraph

Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things.

and the intended contrast between mythical speech of the past and of the present is wholly demarked. The "mythical speech" of Barthes's essay is of a continuum with the "mythical speech" of

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previous times, only "today" it has a different nature, a nature that is of its historical moment (i.e., the historical era of Western consumer capitalism and ideological reification.)

Signifier, Signified, Sign

As this is a presentation of a semiological event, Barthes starts at the basics: the triad of signifier, signified, and sign, the last being "the associative total of the first two" (113). If you are unfamiliar with these terms, I believe the easiest way to get a grasp of them is to *not try to make something complicated* out of them. They are very simple ideas. Barthes's example of the use of roses is about as good an explanatory example as can be had.

I secretly put some roses on a person's work desk to express my passion for that person. The roses, the *material* object of the roses, is the signifier. The *idea* which I am using the roses to convey is the signified. I want this *thing* to speak this *idea*. Two different things. That part's simple. The difficulty comes with the sign which is nothing other than a word to designate the *union* of the two. To speak of the sign is to speak of the whole of the act, both the *material* and *ideational* aspects unified as one thing.[FN]

[FN] I will use the word *material* here consistently, though a signifier need not be strictly material, as with myth, which uses signs as signifiers. Or, if I am brainstorming, the signs I am conveying to myself may have a non-material signifier. However, the word *materiality* functions so well for a base definition, to help create the basic ideas, I will stick with using it in a very broad sense. I am using the method of "if they get the general idea, then they can readily handle the variations."

Calling something a "sign" is recognition that there is an action to convey a signified through the signifier happening.

Equally importantly is to note there can be no sign without such recognition. If I were to put a stapler on the desk (for no reason other than the desk was a convenient place to put it), there is a *material* event, but it is not a signifier of any meaning, and there is thus no sign. If I were to walk past the person's desk and think my passion for them (without any expression) there would be an *idea*, but no conveyance via a signifier, and thus no sign.

Which speaks that the three work together. You cannot have a sign without both signifier and signified. You cannot have a signifier without a signified and both thus making a sign, etc.

That's it. When I see people struggling with this idea it is usually because they are trying to make something out of it far more complex or profound. This is just a declaration of terms and their association. Where it becomes important is wholly in the recognition that the making of the sign *is not itself material*; that is, as Barthes stated in the quotation just above, a sign does not evolve from the nature of things. For example, it could be that putting a marshmallow on a person's desk is a playfully suggestive complement as to the dress of the receiving person by a convention which only those two people know. A sign need not be established within a language; it need only be *recognized* as a sign by a person.

Because of that, if I were to put a stapler on a person's desk as a really poor choice of expression for conveying my passion for that person, for me it might be a sign, but for the person it probably would not, and be merely be a material act. Or, where it was a sign carrying the signified of passion for me, it might (if the person happened to be looking for a stapler at that time) be a sign of considerateness. Or, if I put the stapler down merely to free up my hand for a moment, it could be for the other person a sign of my mental awareness and caution. Or, if I put the stapler down to free up a hand and forgot it, and the person was a person with a semi-psychotic crush on me looking for any requiting of their emotions, there could yet again be a sign made of a material signifier with a signified of passion.

That is why there is that third term *sign*: it recognizes that the material element and the idea element are in themselves insufficient

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to making a sign. There has to be *recognition* of the act by a person.

The terminology applies the same way with language:

dachshund

Color (distinguishable from background color) set out in that general shape is a material signifier conveying to the reader a signified which will be found mostly within the denotations of the English language. As such, when it operates as such, it is a *sign*. (In truth, it is not a sign only when you are no longer seeing it as a *word* but merely as a *design*.)

Myth: The Second-Order Semiological System

Also not so difficult to understand if you keep it simple. A myth is a sign that has for its signifier not a *material* element but *another sign*. Barthes uses a graphic made of boxes to visualize myth as a sign – and I admit I find it curious he decided to descend down the page rather than build up. Here I will be a little more algebraic.

A sign is the unity of a signifier and a signified:

$$\text{SIGN\#1} = \{\text{SIGNIFIER\#1-SIGNIFIED\#1}\}$$

A myth takes that sign and uses it as a *signifier*. As such a myth is

$$\text{SIGN\#2} = \{\text{SIGN\#1-SIGNIFIED\#2}\}$$

or

$$\text{SIGN\#2} = \{\{\text{SIGNIFIER\#1-SIGNIFIED\#1}\}-\text{SIGNIFIED\#2}\}$$

which I admit does little to not make it look confusing. Just remember a myth is a sign that uses a sign for its signifier. So it is a level of meaning *laid on top of* or added to or, as Barthes is demonstrating, *suppressing* the first level of meaning. Barthes calls it *metalanguage*, because it a language act that uses language as its

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signifiers.[FN]

[FN] Do not confuse the "meta-" here with that found in "metahumor" or "metatext," which are related ideas but need not be the same. For example, both words are often used to describe events in a text like a film or book where the text speaks its "awareness" that it is a film or a book, as when it addresses the audience or reader. For example: the Freudian slip scene in *Annie Hall* where Alvy suddenly turns to the audience and say something like "You heard it too, right? I'm not going crazy here.")

On page 117 Barthes adds new terms to keep the first and second level signs distinct in his discussion. He calls:

signifier#2	<i>form</i>
signified#2	<i>concept</i> (which he uses also for signified#1 since they are functionally the same)
sign#2	<i>signification</i>

So at the first level:

$$\text{SIGN} = \{\text{SIGNIFIER-SIGNIFIED}\}$$

and at the second level

$$\text{SIGNIFICATION} = \{\text{FORM-CONCEPT}\}$$

Again, the easiest way to confusion is to make something of this other than "let me call these this to make it easy to tell them apart" (because we will see that a when a sign becomes a form it changes). While the words chosen are ultimately chosen for a reason, he could have as easily called them "Tom, Dick, and Harry." In the discussion below I will stick to the three basic terms, using modifiers to make clear the level of signification. However, while reading through Barthes text – as with any text that is creating its own vocabulary – it is helpful to simply make a chart of Barthes's

diagram with the six terms and keep it beside you.

Barthes gives two examples of mythic language, of second-order signs: the phrase in the Latin text book and the photo of the soldier. Both choices are problematic. The first might throw some people off because of bringing in a second language, and I have found often throws people off because it is hard to see the sign as a language object. The second will very surely throw off most English readers because they won't know the history behind the picture: that of French imperialism and their conflicts in Algeria. (The black soldier is by implication Algerian.) So let me give you two new examples, each of the same nature.

The grammatical:

I look in my English style manual and grammatical and find this:

the babies' toys

On the first level of signification, it is a material signifier that carries a signification, simply because it is a written, English phrase. It is a sign with the signifier constituted of the printed letters and a signifier found in the conventions and definitions of English. But it is being used within my grammar book as an example of how to use the possessive apostrophe with a plural noun ending in -s. The sign that is the phrase is also the signifier of a second-level sign whose signified is "the possessive apostrophe goes after the s with plural nouns ending in s." You can't have that second-level of meaning if you don't have that first sign. If the grammar book had put as its example

dkfu wlen'x wng

it rather would not carry the intended signification. There is no second level signification ("this is an example for a grammar rule") because there is no first level signification (created by the use of English).

Second example:

Instead of a black French soldier let's have instead a picture of a U.S. soldier in a wheel chair saluting a U.S. flag. Even better, let's have a line of veterans in wheel chairs saluting a flag with a banner

naming the local V.A. hospital across the front. The second-level signification that culture has attached to such a picture is one of the glory of the U.S. military and veterans still love their country and how their country still loves them. How this meaning *preys* upon the image is that it is a meaning intended to suppress what might be any first level, individual engagements with the image: for example, that V.A.'s seem to be, across the U.S., rather poor in comparison to even local hospitals, and then, as such, that the photo is a blatant attempt to create positive ideas about a V.A. system that does not do what it should. (Which is, then, seeing the myth for what it is.)

That is the basic idea of it, but to understand the idea in context of the essay you have to circle back around to the front. Many people get confused here in that they lose track of the greater context, and get lost in the jump from "ok, I understand how a sign can be a signifier" to "but what's so important about that?" After all, language is not linear. If you imagine an archaeologist coming upon a never-before-seen text, recognizing the presence of the first-order sign of the "the babies' toys" phrase above could cue the "second-order" sign of the text being a grammar example, which could cue another "second-order" sign that the whole of the text is a grammatical, and if the moment was the opening scene of a movie showing only a person working at a desk, it could then cue yet another "second-order sign" that the man is in fact an archaeologist exploring a new-found text.

Thus the first point we must go back and remember: That's the thing about signs and language: signs are not derived from the nature of things. The material object itself does not make a sign. As such, second-order myths as Barthes is discussing are signs *attached* to things, and, even, could be signs that are *at odds* with the first-order signs they are suppressing. Language may be said to have orders, but that is an abstraction created solely for the its usefulness in the discussion of signs and "Myth Today." (To note, the idea of second-signs does continue in semiology.)

Which leads directly to the second point we need to go back and remember: re-establishing the context of the essay and

Barthes's approach to the subject matter of mythic language today, that demonstrated in the other quotation above:

Naturally, everything is not expressed at the same time: some objects become *the prey* of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear [. . .]. (emphasis still mine)

Barthes is making a distinction between any loose idea of a "second-order sign" (which happens all the time) and the *particular instance* of such second-order signs that constitutes mythic speech today. He is making a distinction between the various signs created with the stapler – which are signs generated by the individuals – and *myths*, which are signs which are *attached* to sign-signifiers not through the individual's engagement with the signifier but *by culture*. They are external to the event. They even *precede* the event.

The various short essays in the book are examples of moments where the individual's engagement with the material event (that is, their own individual meaning-explorations) is suppressed (whether the viewer is cognizant of it or not, though usually the latter) by a second-order *cultural* meaning. For an example, I need only the first paragraph of "Striptease":

Striptease – at least Parisian striptease – is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked. We may therefore say that we are dealing in a sense with a spectacle based on fear, or rather on the *pretence* of fear as if eroticism here went to further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs *have only to be announced* to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration. (84, all emphasis mine)

Notice how he contextualizes the event to a particular socio-historical moment. He is not talking about the event of a striptease universally. He is talking about how in Paris the event of striptease – which is supposed to be erotic – has been suppressed by mythic speech so that it is now based on fear, which is why the woman ends up desexualized after performing an act that is at its core an overt presentation of sexuality. It is a second-order sign in that that fear exists – and can exist – only because the first-order sign is of the

erotic. And it is because the second-order sign is no longer attached to the materiality of a woman taking her clothes off that the "ritual signs have only to be announced" to evoke the second-order meaning of sexuality in that context of fear.

Continuing On . . .

The rest of the essay is explication of and elaboration upon that basic idea – understood, of course, within the context of myth as cultural speech. Here Barthes is flushing out both his semiological presentation of "myth today" and – in the process – the nature of the cultural commentary he is making about France (and contemporary Western culture in general). As such, it is not *necessary* to understanding the short essays that make up the rest of the book in the context presented by the book as a whole. He is moving more into advance theories of language. But recognize also he is not talking an established science, he is flushing out these ideas for themselves. As such, they are not perfect in their presentation.

It is worth the going through if you can manage it, though I will admit it occasionally makes for difficult parsing. Keep in mind while reading it this presentation is not carried outside this book except through direct reference to this book. Which is not to say there is anything incorrect, here. It is more to say that the science of semiology rather approaches the matter through its own more established terms than through Barthes's. Also, keep in mind this was written in 1957, and is something of a first go at the ideas being presented. (Even in his own *Elements of Sumiology*, which is 1964, he has greatly changed his language and presentation.) I will give but very brief summary/notation, organized by Barthes's headers.

The form and the concept: Describes what happens to the signifier and signification as it moves from the first to the second order. The signifier of the first order is suppressed by the myth when it becomes the signifier (form) of the second order. It is emptied out of meaning (though never wholly, or the myth could not exist).

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That emptiness is filled in by the second-order concept – which does function exactly as the first-order concept: it gives meaning. What is important about myth is that it is putting meaning upon a signifier that already had meaning. It is suppressing the first meaning in favor of the second.

The signification: Perhaps the most important moment of the section comes early:

However paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear. There is no latency [in Freudian terms] of the concept in relation to the form: there is no need of an unconscious in order to explain myth. (121, emphasis his for once)

There is also this moment:

What the concept distorts is of course what is full, the meaning: the lion and the Negro are deprived of their history, changed into *gestures*. (122, emphasis mine)

I cannot help but recognize how this becomes the reiterative *performance* of culture (which is to say performed re-affirmation of the truths of culture) in later thinkers like Mary Douglas and Judith Butler.

One more, since it's a long section and I'm only doing indicative quotations:

The mythic signification [. . .] is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy. (126)

Which may be a statement Barthes himself might reject later on in that signs are always "arbitrary" in the sense that they are never inherent to the signifier – whether it is first-order or second-. But recognizing that to a degree far greater than first-order signs, second-order myths are *motivated*: they serve a purpose, which is the self-maintenance of the constancy of mass-culture (a language Barthes doesn't use) in all its aspects, including promoting – as with the myth attached French soldier – national chauvinism (and thus social stability).

Reading and deciphering myth: A section which is as much about how myths function as how to see through myths, and as such we come to a key sentence that is another turn back to the beginning:

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. (129)

I break the passage in two because what follows is more technical, and that sentence deserved to be isolated.

We now understand why, *in the eyes of the myth-consumer*, the intention, the adhomination of the concept, can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is read not as a motive but as a [rational] reason. (129, emphasis his)

"Adhomination" as in *ad hominem*, appeal to emotions rather than reason; attacking character rather than the actual argument. A myth is not meant to function – nor does it function – with the discourse of language like first-order signs. Where language at the first-order is language *about* reality but not derived directly from the nature of reality, myth strives to establish just that connection. Myth's concepts are generated through "adhomination" – through the emptying of meaning of the original signifier in place of a new, emotionally based, cultural concept. But it conceals that artificiality by "freezing" the language moment into a fixed meaning (Derrida would call it sedimentation, in an important reversal of type of energy involved, from the active to the passive). In freezing the concept of the myth it creates *validity* for the concept, it creates a *stability* that gives the impression of *being derived from the nature of things*, thus validating the *reality* of the concept (even though the concept is wholly artificial) and hiding the motivation of the concept behind that mask of veracity. (What Barthes describes in *Criticism and Truth* as *versimilitude*.)

Barthes describes the event well at the end of the paragraph (speaking again about the photograph of the soldier):

[F]or the myth-reader [i.e., the believer of myth] the outcome is quite different: everything happens as if the

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picture *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier *gave a foundation* to the signified: the myth exists from the precise moment when French imperialism achieves the natural state [. . .]. (129-30, emphasis his)

This is the key element of myth's function: it serves to create *truths*. As Barthes says at the close of the section:

[A]ny semiological system is a system of values; now, the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system. (131)

When Derrida takes this up, he is describing the same idea though from a different approach: that language and culture *naturally* "freezes" or sediments, that language as not speaking reality is and *active* engagement only: it is the nature of the mass to believe language as *truths*. To note, Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* is a very good presentation of how this functions in religion. (Though, many other books speak it less technically, as with Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*.)

I'll stop here. What follows from that point on is mostly cultural and political application of the ideas developed to this point. Indeed, much of what follows *Myth as a stolen language* (131) can be read without the advanced class in semiology. Keep in mind, however, the more the subject is of culture, the more it is anchored in his place and time. For example, you cannot take his comments on poetry and apply it to the whole of the genre. He is speaking critically about a very specific body of literature. (Though, to be honest, even then I don't bite on that hook.)