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Opening Up

When Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was 42 years old, in 1957, his famous essays on seeing, hearing, thinking and living 'the modern world' were published in French as *Mythologies*. It was not until 1972 (under the same title) that a first selection was published in English. A second selection—called *The Eiffel Tower and other Mythologies*—was published in English in 1979. By the time of the first English selection, Barthes had qualified his earlier work in very significant ways. Two essays in that crucial year of our history—1968 ("L'effet du reel", translated as "The reality effect" in *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. T. Todorov, Cambridge, England, 1983, II:2, and "Texte, Théorie du", translated as "Theory of the text" in various collections) advance and change the project and politics of *Mythologies*. This is most clearly spelled out in a text Barthes wished to call "La mythologie aujourd'hui" but which became published as "Change the object itself" (translated in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. S. Heath, Fontana, 1977). Any renewal of the work of doing mythologies cannot then simply replicate what Barthes was doing in 1950s, so my writing here is a call for renewal, for re-making our senses new, with a different *Mythologies* done differently.

Reading In and Out

We live, work, love, and move through worlds that confront us as always-already-there, as natural, neutral, universal and obvious. The critical impulse, still necessary if not sufficient, we can take from *Mythologies* is one which recognises the cognitive and emotional work done by social forms. We may not like them but we always take these forms (as obstacle or enjoyment) as *there*, to be walked around, like, in that important familiar sense, the door that always sticks, the key that needs that extra turn, the stair that always creaks. We negotiate ourselves in terms of them. This is, in so many important ways, necessary—there are always other senses to move to, other tasks at hand, projects that hurry us on. Indeed one major problem and distract us from other, seemingly more simple pursuits. In the face of so much abundance, how churlish it seems to raise complaints!

Barthes' greatest donation, and it is a gift, was to make us pause, to look again, to reconsider, to *re-read* what we normally glancingly "take in" and then move on *from*. He enjoins us (and we can, I am arguing, join with him) to ask *how* it is that this and that come to work for us in the ways that they do. But the later essays qualify the original mythologizing by questioning the centredness of the "logics" at the heart of the mythic, the dream of science/lust for certainty that underpins so much of the structuralist and semiological *analyses*. Barthes is saying over, showing how, we should not ask oversearchingly "Why?", nor even too scientifically "What?" of the social forms, but *how* is it that we continuously take so much for granted? Because that taken-for-granted, apparently located "out" and the "over" *there*, the taken for

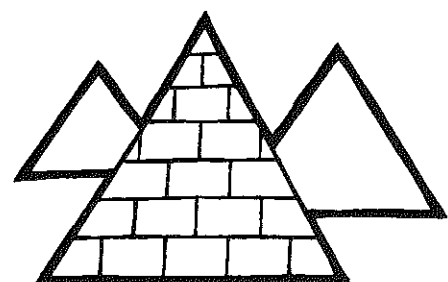
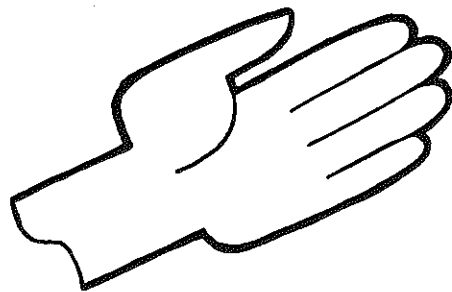
granted, in fact involves the image we construct of ourselves. In confirming our sense of what and how we are, it allows us to forget how we might be different.

The change from the demythologizing of the 1950s (which Barthes considered by the mid 1960s to have become itself a mythology) can best be indexed, it seems to me, by use of the now fashionable description of how we actively make sense of social forms—*reading*. Demythologizing consists in *reading off* the way some form works through *reading in* some scheme of how it is constructed and constrained to mean what it does. In this positive moment, myth is viewed as a type of language which conveys in the descriptors, normative, evaluative and imperative directions. This, as Barthes later clarified, does two rather unprogressive things: it leaves the world as it is, and it leaves the analyst out of the depiction. If demythologizing reads the world of the forms as text(s), his later theory of the texts (perversely) denies the existence of a meta-language, and seeks an understanding of the world as textuality. This is where we are now.

I am Writing

I am in/formed by these social forms that seem so neutral, natural, universal and Obvious. Barthes' criticism of simply demythologizing—not because it was "wrong" but because it was partial—registers a set of questions which critical work (theoretical and practical) remains largely silent about. These are questions of morality and motivation. In his writing about being an intellectual and an academic (recall how he ended up, albeit describing himself as the "joker in the pack", at the Collège de France, scandalously lecturing on "my semiology") Barthes depicts the ways in which he was constructed and constrained in power, not because of what he taught, but because of how teaching and learning works within lines of force. What regulates educational (and many social forms of communication—and are there, really, any other *kind* of social forms?) practices are the formal qualities of the encouraged, proper, correct forms of expression—centrally those of writing, and speaking—centrally those of writing, and speaking about writing. These forms all turn and return to that age old distinction of Good/Bad, invented (as Nietzsche explains of Virtue in general) not by those struggling to become, but by those who argue they already possess Goodness which is, as *they* say, next to Godliness, of course!

Against these powers of the *discursion* (to invent a word), he suggested, bashfully, the lightening, baffling, turning of those powers by *excursion*. What is significant in the shift from reading the world of forms as text, to struggling with their contradictions as textuality, is the *re-placing* of the struggling subject as one who is "caught up" already. Barthes, by a long detour and hard work, rediscovered what is precisely revolutionary in Marx's project of socialism (which would redefine such terms as "social control" and "socialization") which is the rekindly of the necessary fusion of the subjective and objective worlds to temper the practices of simultaneously changing circumstances and selves. Any form of action, engagement,



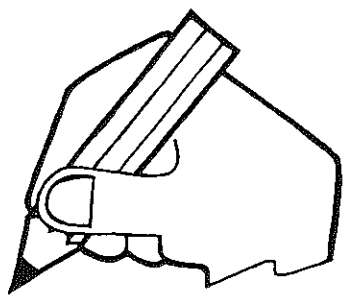
commitment or project which wishes to hold still one or other way of understanding our social being will reproduce some of the very constraining features that the original impulse sought to transform. Objectivism. Subjectivism.

Questions about the morality of form(s) pervade Barthes' writings. Writing becomes a metaphor—hence, as always, dangerously informative—for living. With writing, language is always previous; with living, social forms are always previous. With writing, the dialogic, rhetorical and depicting struggle is always to stay sufficiently on the ground of the forms and norms that name and endow a practice as that kind of writing/publication, and yet to make (or, more often, re-make) it new enough to open to—that is, emphatically, to be able to be open to, that “other” writing which we call reading. “Forms”? That range of conditioned practices, relations and forces of production, modes of making public, sets of senses and sensibilities, through which social living is lived—thought, sedimented, fragmented. “Norms”? That range of *conditions* for those practices, relations, etc. The moral questions here are legion and legendary—they are often in danger of being taken for granted, i.e. repressively forgotten. What do forms make possible and what do they make difficult/impossible? Yes, and of course that too needs saying, they are positive: they make possible, encourage, facilitate, empower all of us in some ways (and, perhaps, some of us in all ways—on this I am agnostic). But they make impossible, discourage, deny, dilute, disempower all of us in others.

I am Written

The key questions then become How does this form work (locally and globally) to empower/deny the subject who is written—socially formed. Secondly, how do sets of social forms (e.g. in a major institutional practice like education or like writing-publishing) carry this normalization forward, catching up these traces of a certain social identity to make *that* an effective presentation of that social individual, i.e. that kind of person, as we say. Doing mythologies, now, seems to me to revive specific attention to the three Cs—Constraint, Contradiction, Construction—and I want to sketch a motivated methodology for doing that kind of mythologies. The three moments I depict here are (1) militant negativism, (2) making a judgement, and (3) affirmation of potential. They are also (simultaneously) bodily statements of engagement by the analyst/activist: the second glance (re-reading), the search, and the encounter. Just as there is an interrogative morality to ask for forms, so too is there a differential morality to find in the human capacities displaced into silence by those forms, or condensed into certain satisfactions, ubiquitous abundance.

The second glance ‘deranges’ (makes strange) the taken for granted. Attending for the first time, perhaps, we realise (and it is a bodily state) that certain patterns are there, relational sets: the natural way we have to go from some to another place; the

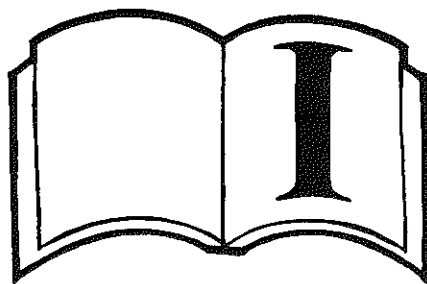


neutral seeming forms through which we conduct exchanges; the universal features of a sense of responsibility, rage, love, as gendered; the Obviousness that surrounds us like (and the metaphor is very material) the very air we breathe. We look again, we start to enquire. Operating with the motivated morality I have described we try to find the features of power and the modalities of control that are embodied in what these forms are and above all how they operate. We make our first strike against naturalness by finding the socially constructed specific features of these forms as historical: how did they come into being, change operate, stabilise, switch meanings. This is a necessarily *thick* description from which we have a sufficiently adequate sense of the texture of social relations we have shown. This militant negativism (Marx: “Doubt everything”) makes central what the dominant theories and practices cannot bear to hear (their notation cannot register): those forms of social difference which are neither abstracted as totalizing institutions (citizens, voters, consumers, everyone and thus no-one) nor terrifyingly concrete as individualizing practices (the unit-subject fixed, scheduled and called upon).

The search engages the differential features of the form, in order to make a judgement. It is here where the major shift from mythologizing is greatest. The second glance and the search might be misread as what has been called the concrete analysis of the concrete situation by Lenin. But largely typical of Lenin, and certainly typical of Leninism/Boshevism, the analyst remains outside *and* brings his (as *historically* it nearly always has) analysis to bear, to add to, to illuminate the “what is”, that the analysands—the people/situational context—cannot by definition already know, or know only in a kind of 5-out-of-10-could-try-harder intellectualist grading! Typically these analyses are in fact abstracted analyses of phenomenal situations. “Making a judgement” means registering not what people already know (for they know far more than intellectuals judge them to know) but how their knowing has illuminated the historical shapefulness, the contemporary weight, and the flexible contradictions of the social forms. Through that illumination, that historical experience as it rolls, crashes and breaks against the powered forms that constrain it, the forms in their current moment may be judged: how they impact, restrain, how they are contradictory, and what work *can* be done within, and what work *has* to be done without, them.

In a responding comment concerning pastoral poetic writing (in 1977, in the book of interviews with him by New Left Review, *Politics and Letters*, p. 307) Raymond Williams offers a clarification:

... I think that one has to distinguish two kinds of judgement, which, however, it is never possible finally to separate. There is the one level at which we say that a specific form was historically productive and therefore historically valuable—in that sense it was a major contribution to human culture.



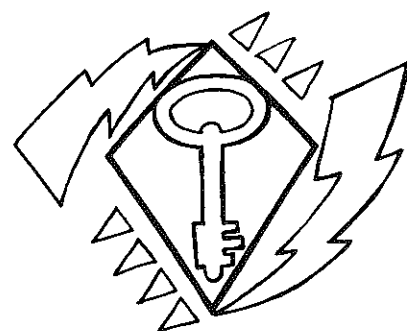
But we must also be able to say, in a distinct but connected way, that it was a disastrously powerful contribution. In the same way one can acknowledge the productive capacity of bourgeois society, or its political institutions, and yet distance oneself from them as creations which not only later become, but in an important sense in the very mode of their constitution always were, blocks on human freedom or even human progress. The power of achievement is not a self-sufficient value. If you cannot make the first judgement, then all history becomes a current morality, and there ceases to be any history. If you cannot make the second, I do not know what an affiliation to the working class would be for me.

This is where we are now.

Because I now see (and it took a lot of unlearning, and of course my seeing is not the same as either showing clearly, or being able to see from where others' seeing, saying and showing have enabled me to know what I do) this illumination, engagement, struggle from the third place (that of social difference) simultaneously against the dyadic other two (totalizing institutions/individualizing practices, *alias* the ancient dualism of Society/Self, *aka* as Objectivity/Subjectivity: It Is/I Am, etc., playing at a theatre near you) to be the only real foundations for and toward a different sense of sociality, this phase of judgement is also that of being positively negative.

This positivity is different from the positivity enshrined (and the religious term is highly appropriate) in the forms being analysed. Like Benjamin's flashes of light and moments of danger, these positivities do not simply expose the secular hells upon which all the much vaunted miracles of our times and places actually rest, but reveals the sources of this different illumination. It is a different pragmatics, a historical pragmatics that enforces a historicity at the centre of what is otherwise an endlessly present stasis-analysis, that cyclically rediscovers that (a) capitalism is not a moral system, that State forms are not motivated and skewed; (b) that cultural forms have disabling as much as enabling consequences. Rudely, but not crudely, to such effervescent moralities (that curiously leaves their proponents smiling!) a correct response would be “So . . . What's new!” This different pragmatics draws attention to the divergent uses of forms/products/objects that goes on despite the symbolic universalization of their exchange-value, their commodification. It brings back, by showing where there is language for saying, a different subjectivity formed through the ways that historical experiences clash, roll and rock against the organised set of social expressions. It shows, sharply, that the forms which name also make claims, but that these claims need not (quite/all the time) fix those named. Out back of the real, the symbolic is always being worked, the imaginary is always being played, the forms are being turned.

This pragmatics registers a different potential for sociality because it announces a social *organization* (and no word is more in need of caring consideration just now) that cannot be, within the terms of a current morality or an encouraging rhetoric, be totalised. The way the forms impact upon and are illuminated by groups socially differentiated by time and place,



by gender, ethnicity, class, language, age, occupation, sexual preference, is to register the limitations of the claims and the contradictions in the naming attempted by these seemingly neutral, natural, universal and Obvious forms. Just as this socialization is questioned, so too is the socialization thus embodied.

The encountering of this difference is already an affirmation of potential. This encounter—a social numeration of a qualitatively different sort is involved—recognises that there are within the differentially subordinated resources, means, capacities that are actually turning, deflecting, reworking dominant social forms. This involves articulating the traces—shreds of a language, hints of a collective symbology, that registers precisely what the forms deny, forms of knowledge and forms of cultural relations that operate below a level of normalised visibility. What is necessary? What is possible?

Both/And, not Either/Or

Logic chopping and concept shuffling are the commonplace features of much education. The one thing we can say about the body of intellectuals and academics is that characteristically they are rarely embodied in their writing, they are not there. This is pervasive—writing, speaking, teaching, commenting: they map, contour, gloss the Other, gracefully or mechanically, they are not there. That they are not there means they are not caught up in the depictions they offer. This authority—claim (disguised in an enforced, normalised form of writing) grounds the persistent use of dichotomies along with schema of such cleansed methodological instruments that they can only reflect the brilliance of their originators.

I think what we have to do—this “we” being located individuals like myself within the apparatus of education—is to start examining where we are. How do “our” neutral, natural, universal and Obvious forms operate, what is their differential impact, how are we embodied in them, what do they encourage and what do they deny? This is all the more urgent because education is also a “carrier” wave for other forms—forms which I now see as centrally constraining (they hurt as much as they help)—such as modes of talking together (conference, seminar, colloquium, symposium—the challenge being with the “workshop”), making public (the journal, the occasional paper, the book, etc.). Groups that challenge dominant forms have tended to make use of what seem technical and neutral means to further their desirable ends. Significantly the main challenges to modes of communication (and modes of language) have come from social groups of doubling difference—those defined by gender, eth-

nicity, or language—along with local/community forms of activity of groups defined by class. The dominant “Left” Parties, Sects and the institutions of The Labour Movement have generally, at least in their national and international practices, adopted these inherited forms of talking together and making public. For ten years now I have felt, and had told to me, experiences of denial, disempowerment, dilution and dismay in the face of these routinised practices beyond and within academic life.

Doing Mythologies

Mythologies is done, a lot of the time, quietly; sometimes, loudly and visibly, in what we might call languages of action; in second-glancing, sometimes because this looking-again is enforced, at how things get done. The famous popular response to certain long-winded justifications for the current state of things is “Seems So!” but this does not entail commitment to strategic belief, rather it is a working response, entailing a kind of tactical seriousness. The affirmative movement I have described is a double one: first, there is a pervasive “not yet” of hopes, aspirations, beliefs and desires which current social forms cannot relate to, even though they place some of them on the agenda! Secondly, there is an important way in which the shifts in mythologies Barthes sketched out from the mid-1960s point to a different understanding of ontology and epistemology (being and knowing) in their suggestion that what social forms “really” are can never be discovered by a clinical, brilliant exposé of their motivated operation (their General Immorality in all and every claim to be neutral, natural, universal and Obvious)—nor yet can be it “shown” by drawing up a recipe of different institutions, a species of Left Moralism that is extremely elitist. Instead, what Barthes is suggesting is that what social forms “really” are can only be found in how they are lived—within, against, without—not at the level of their abstract coding, nor yet in their concrete structuration, but in their how-it-feels-like texture. His terms in the later writings point to this, as I have tried to by centralising Contradiction, and by making my third term “affirmation”. But he also suggested something else, or several features of how intellectual and academic work could be done differently.

Instead of The Master (typically as it was and predominantly is) acting as analyst to his analysand students and their problems—the higher level of the teaching paradigm in schooling which expects/demands obedience in return for knowledge—Barthes does one major inversion. He was the analysand and his seminar students the analysts—what did they make of his digressions (in speech) and fragmentation (in writing)? I want to close by making a second inversion: social forms should be seen as providing us with questions, not answers: questions as to how they operate which we cannot answer alone, but which

need to be reformulated in terms of the historical experience of the pragmatics of use, exchange, contradiction and refusal of those differentiated groups. Whilst I agree that one necessary form of explanation is tautological—replacing the explanation in the context of its origination and tracing the dynamic trajectory, explains how things are what they are—this is insufficient. It removes one form of puzzlement—“Ah, that is way . . .”; but represses another—“Then, how does this work, how am I caught up in/by it . . .?”. Here the shift of Barthes (although the traces are present in his earliest book, *Writing Degree Zero*) is toward a phenomenology. This needs supplementation by a pragmatics. If the phenomenological tells us about the interactive exchanges of situated communications, the pragmatics tells us about the productive uses of differential meaning-making.

Thus the cultural forms of education can be seen to involve different moments of productivity: a structuration of space, time and text (what is taught, how it is taught, how “correct” transmissions are assessed, and the social evaluation of this final certification) embodying practices of knowledge production: making available, making public, making meaningful. This last of the fused moments is the site of particularly complicated contradictions around constraint (hence the view of education as reproduction) and construction (thus the minority view of education as positively productive). It seems to me that a form can both be phenomenologically productive/reproductive and pragmatically trivial/tedious—that is what I take many educational exchange-performances to be about.

Generalizing from this it means that we cannot read/ignore the silences as if they were self-explanatory (apathy, deference, contentment, containment, etc.); rather they are unsaid (but often showable if a second glance is given) of a pragmatics which refuses what is provided, or uses it differently. Such a view also changes our orientation to where the point of production actually is to be found.

Finally, then, I am saying that doing mythologies involves what the early work “left out”—how (with particular this-sidedness) do social forms mean (how do States state?!). In that intertextuality, differential, historical experience rocking and rolling against regulated expressions, we find the resources for a different social scape, affirming thereby the human capacities denied, the desires “not yet” accomplishable, and also, as importantly, the degrees (for it is variable) to which the dominant forms do not dominate. Thereby, and never alone, always with others, we shall have begun to change the object(ive) itself, in changing our senses of our selves, who we are and who we might become.

