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The Deaths of Semiology and Mythoclasm: Barthes and Media Studies

Paul Cobley

Abstract: Roland Barthes is one of the most well-known semioticians outside academic circles. That knowledge is sometimes based on misconceptions about his theory of signs, extrapolated from Saussure. This article will offer an outline of Roland Barthes' sign theory, demonstrating the ways that it is derived and adapted from Saussure and how Saussure is refracted through Barthes' readings of other linguists. It will look in particular at Barthes' innovations in sign theory: denotation, connotation and metalanguage, as well as his extension of linguistic thinking to analyse nonverbal modes. It will also discuss Barthes' notion of 'myth' and its influence as a concept. The article will consider a number of instances from media and cultural studies where Barthes' interpretations have not only given subsequent uses of sign theory license to speculate beyond Saussure's original linguistic bearing but have also unwittingly contributed to the stagnation of semiotic analysis.

Keywords: Barthes, Saussure, semiology, mythology, semioclasm

Barthes' influence in English-speaking academia is probably most directly traceable to the publication of Annette Lavers' and Colin Smith's 1967a translation of *Éléments de sémiologie*. Indeed, scholars whose first language was neither French nor English have testified to the importance of this volume. Yet, from the vantage point of the present and, certainly from the point of view of a post-cultural studies academy, the initial circumstances in which this volume was published are worthy of note. The volume was not published by a university press or a large academic publishing house, such as Routledge or Blackwell, as might be expected today. Rather, it appeared in the list of Jonathan Cape, a high profile London-based publisher associated mainly with the publishing of works of fiction. Indeed, *Elements of Semiology* appeared in a Cape series which included a selection of late modernist texts such as Charles Olson's *Mayan Letters*, Alfred Jarry's *The Supermale*, Baudelaire's *Twenty Prose Poems*, the *Selected Poems* of Yves Bonnefoy, as well as *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss* (by George Charbonnier) and Barthes' own *Writing Degree Zero*, translated in the same year as *Elements*, again by Annette Lavers.

Barthes' prominent writings, then, assumed what seems, in retrospect, a somewhat strange and overdetermined position in English intellectual circles. They were part of a general importation of French thought to Britain which continues today and generally features the latest Parisian intellectual fads reformulated for sales and public relations purposes. In this case, the translation seemed to bracket *Elements* in a late modernist, post-existentialist Gallic moment. Furthermore, Barthes' work was not simply a matter for academic scrutiny: to be sure, it was difficult and intellectual; but it is probably its interdisciplinary range, its embrace of the quotidian and the popular, as well as its Gallic flourish that made it so apposite for publication to a wider middle-brow audience. Indeed, this has remained the case to this day. There is a famous scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1978) which features a pretentious conversation about McLuhan in an arts cinema queue in Manhattan. If one were to recast this

to London in the present day, it would not be unlikely that the subject of the conversation is, still, Roland Barthes (among a limited number of other potential candidates).

The hold that is exerted by Parisian intellectuals over middle-brow discourse in contemporary Britain should not be underestimated. The presentation of Barthes' other prominent translated works underlines this. *Mythologies* was published in English translation (by Annette Lavers, once more) in 1972, again by Cape, but launched in 1973a as a popular paperback published by Paladin. The book's credentials beyond academic debate, reaching into the world of the mass market paperback, are evident from its cover:

ILLUSTRATION 1, HERE.

The back cover quotes the conservative literary critic (and champion of Bob Dylan's writing), Christopher Ricks, to the effect that "Barthes is the McLuhan of signs". John Weightman's comments for *The Observer*, are also recorded: significantly, he suggests that "Barthes is an intellectual star, one of the very small group of *maîtres à penser*, such as Sartre, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault". In the present, *après* post-structuralism, it is unusual to see Barthes' name mentioned in the company of Sartre in this way; but Weightman's appraisal is further evidence of the point made above about *Elements of Semiology*: that it was received as one more contribution to the pantheon of French celebrity moderns or *maîtres à penser*.

Just as significant as the critics' puffs, perhaps, is the cataloguing category on the back cover of the book: 'Modern Society'. Barthes is no longer presented as a literary critic (as in *Writing Degree Zero*, for example), particularly as there is no literary criticism in *Mythologies*. Rather, he is more of a 'cultural critic', corresponding with the origins of the essays collected in the book. The essay on 'Myth today', which is like an appendix to the mythologies analysed in the volume, serves as a theoretical coda, unraveling the new science of signs (semiology) for those readers who were just becoming aware of the phenomenon called 'structuralism' – another French 'ism' to supersede 'existentialism'. Anthologies such as those of Macksey and Donato and of deGeorge and DeGeorge had given structuralism (and, partly, semiology) a profile in English-speaking academic circles; but, with the exception of the 1972 Wolfson Lectures (see Robey 1973), there was no account of the new French thought for a wider audience before 'Myth Today'.

Barthes' range of interests in 'modern society' also created the demand for a further, influential popular publication, although there remained some ties to literary study in this. A

collection of essays, *Image-Music-Text*, was published in 1977a, having been translated and edited by Stephen Heath.

ILLUSTRATION 2, HERE.

Heath was one of a number of younger British scholars operating within the co-ordinates of literary theory, film analysis and French thought in general, a mix that was considered at the time to be quite heady and exciting by academics and middle-brow spectators alike. *Image-Music-Text* brought together a number of essays of literary and visual analysis in a popular Fontana paperback (the front cover picture, above, carries the logo of Flamingo, Collins' successor to Fontana as a paperback imprint; the cover design remained the same, however). Importantly, the volume spread the news from the horse's mouth about such pressing topics for those with a literary interest as 'The death of the author', 'An introduction to the structural analysis of narratives' and how structuralism moved 'From work to text'. In addition, it contained essays beyond the literary, continuing Barthes' commitment to nonverbal communication ('The rhetoric of the image', 'The photographic message', 'The grain of the voice', etc.).

The above, semiological publications of Barthes are the pre-eminent ones in Britain; the latter two remain in print in popular editions to this day. But it is worth remembering that many academics believe that, intellectually speaking, there is more than the one Barthes represented in these books. Frequently, it is assumed that there is the early, semiological, Barthes and the later, poststructuralist Barthes. Sometimes, the very early, 'modern writing' Barthes precedes the other two. Leonard Jackson (1991, pp. 124-168) cogently argues that the situation is slightly more complicated than this and that Barthes' early interest in, and promotion of, modern writers such as Brecht and Robbe-Grillet continued through his semiological/'scientific' phase and was transformed into 'textual mysticism'. In the later period, Barthes became pre-occupied with 'writing' and saw his work not in an expository light, but as part of the avant-garde literature of which he had originally been a champion. Jackson suggests that Barthes came to view with misgivings his influence as a semiologist or sign scientist, although, as we will see, this was not necessarily a simple adjunct of his metamorphosis into a poststructuralist guru on the pleasure of the text. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized now that although the work of the 'later' Barthes continued to have great influence in literary theory circles and, briefly, in film theory, it is the Barthes of semiological theory that has thrived through communications, media and cultural studies. Sign theory effectively became synonymous with Barthes' work Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, pp. 5, 22), who offer alternative approaches to signs in visual texts, acknowledge this fact in their references to "the Paris School", by which they mean, above all, Barthes. The

teaching of the work of “the Paris School” in Britain, is seen by Kress and van Leeuwen to have been carried out by a number of textbooks which are referenced in the current article. Barthes’ semiological work was at the forefront of these as semiotics strived to gain a toehold in British universities.

There are a number of reasons why semiotics has struggled in Britain during recent years. One of them is that much of the serious semiotics that is practiced and promoted in university faculties devoted to the study of language and multimodality, is actually ‘social semiotics’, an outgrowth of Hallidayan work, tinged with poststructuralism, which mistakenly takes itself to be the whole of contemporary semiotics. Kress and van Leeuwen’s work is repeatedly referenced, here. The other major reasons are indirectly to do with Barthes. The first is that, with the help of Barthes, semiotics (in fact, glottocentric semiology), became fashionable in the mid-1970s. As such, it was always vulnerable to falling out of fashion and being blamed for all sorts of ills of textual and cultural analysis of which semiotics as a whole was not actually guilty (for example, bracketing audiences and reception). The second is that semiotics, in a slightly less serious form than that carried out by the language/discourse/multimodality semioticians in Britain (and Australia, especially), lived on. To this day, first year undergraduate students of communications, media and cultural studies in Britain sit introductory courses on the key methods and approaches in their subject area. Usually, this will entail a week or two’s teaching, by a junior member of staff, on sign theory, sandwiched with sessions on quantitative and qualitative method, plus other topics such as ‘how to do ideology critiques’ (see, for example, Fiske 1990, which, though dated, remains the standard textbook in the field at this level). The putatively more substantial and theoretical material which is believed to interest students (and, even to politicize them – poststructuralism is a case in point), is generally left until the second year of degree studies. As a result, few students get the chance to engage with the breadth of semiotics and, certainly, most postgraduates in the subject area, if they are interested in theory, tend to pursue studies related to themes introduced by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva and the like. And the semiotics that is taught to first years usually revolves around Barthes, especially *Mythologies* (see, for example, Deacon et al 1999).

Yet, if Barthes’ fate in Anglophone communication, media and cultural studies is to be consigned primarily to the role of sign theorist, it is worth considering of what that sign theory consists, particularly in relation to semiotics as a whole. Let us therefore consider the chief components of Barthes’ influential theory of the sign; how it has been taken as synonymous with Saussure and ‘structuralism’; how it departs from Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916); and how it has been used in communications, media and cultural studies. The sign theory of Roland Barthes is distributed across a large number of works in

literary theory and communications, from his early analysis of '*écriture blanche*' in the work of Albert Camus, to the pinnacle of his poststructuralist achievements in books such as *S/Z* (1970), *Le plaisir du texte* (1973b) and *La chambre claire* (1980). It is explicit in theoretical essays from the 1960s such as his analysis of an advertisement – and, by association, much advertising imagery – in 'The rhetoric of the image' (1977a) and implicit in essays which function more like manifestoes than sign analyses: for example, 'The death of the author' (1977c). However, *Elements of Semiology* undoubtedly contains Barthes most focused comments on sign theory, although it was the culmination of a growing preoccupation for Barthes.

It is easy to ignore the fact that Barthes continued to write about literary criticism and that early work such as *Le degré zero de l'écriture* (1953) was also carried out alongside such explicitly analytic disquisitions as the essay on signs entitled 'Myth today' in *Mythologies*. As is well known, Barthes was discovering linguistics during this period and probably not entirely divorcing his study of literature from his study of popular culture in this respect. Each 'mythology' in the latter volume - wrestling, the haircuts of the Roman characters in Mankiewicz's film of *Julius Caesar*, the face of Garbo, *steack frites*, striptease, the New Citroën and the brain of Einstein, for example – provided evidence for Barthes that "myth is a language" (1973a, p. 11). More importantly, though, Barthes claims to have actually initiated semiology in this work (1973a, p. 9), instituting the general science of signs that Saussure had first called for (in print) forty-one years before.

As a type of speech (as Barthes insisted it was) the myth that creates mythologies produces two levels of signification. The first level of this system Barthes calls the *language-object*: "it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system" (1973a, p. 115). This level is the domain of the *signifiant* (sound pattern) and *signifié* (mental concept) which Saussure envisaged as being connected in the brain to produce a (linguistic) sign. For Barthes, this level is where straightforward indicating takes place: denotation. The second level, on the other hand, is *metalanguage*: a language that speaks about the first level. The level of metalanguage is constituted by connotation and Barthes suggests that connotation is *cynical* because it relies on the level of denotation to naturalize any ideological proposition which it embodies.

In terms of the analysis of the sign, *Mythologies* is a crucial forerunner to the systematic disquisition in *Elements of Semiology* seven years later. The visual nature of many of the mythologies in the former book are taken for granted as Barthes applies what was originally a linguistic conception of the sign (Saussure's). In the period leading up to *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes also continued to work on sartorial signification of vestments. *Système de*

la Mode (1967b) is concerned with the nature of the sign of women's vestments as illustrated in fashion magazines. Barthes had been working on the analyses presented in this book during the period 1957-1963 and his ruminations carry over into *Elements of Semiology*. These examples are clear evidence that, from a very early stage, Barthes was keen to put forth a general notion of the sign which, for all its reliance on a thoroughly linguistic basis, he saw as perfectly adequate for understanding verbal and nonverbal semiotic systems alike.

In *Elements of Semiology* Barthes does not shrink from going beyond the concept of sign which is evident in the teaching of some linguists. In general, he seeks to explicate an understanding of language not as a collection of discrete signs but as an organizing principle of discursive fields. Such discursive fields would not be constituted by verbal signs (and their connections) alone. Rather, they would take the lead of language as a system of organization. Indeed, he suggests somewhat giddily that "linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics: to be precise, it is that part covering the *great signifying unities* of discourse" (1967a, p. 11). Despite Barthes' impetus to embrace the semiotics of verbal and nonverbal systems, then, his sign theory is nevertheless geared to a notion of language as the touchstone of organization.

For Barthes, it is the repetition of signs in successive discourses that entails that each sign becomes an element of the language (*la langue* – "language without speech" [Barthes 1967a, pp. 14-15]). However, according to Saussure, *langue* is a heuristic means for thinking about the language system; language without speech would actually be impossible. Barthes therefore draws attention to the fashion system, where signs work in a somewhat different way. For Barthes, the garment cannot be an instance of speech; rather, it is always "a systematized set of signs and rules: it is a language in a pure state" (1967a, p. 26). This is because "fashion clothes (as written about) are the language at the level of vestimentary communication and speech at the level of verbal communication" (1967a, p. 26). The feature of the sign which seems to be most crucial for Barthes and which encourages him to make the counterpoint to Saussure is the idea of the sign as part of an 'ideological' organizing principle. Whereas individual or collective uses of speech (or individual or collective usages of food, the analogous example he uses – 1967a, p. 28) might become part of language (or alimentary language) as a result of repetition or 'evolution', what makes up the constituents of 'language' in the case of fashion is the highly directed work of a 'deciding group'.

If it was not clear from the analysis of 'myth' offered by Barthes in *Mythologies*, then *Elements of Semiology* makes it apparent that central to his theory of the sign is the way that it can be not simply an ideological *vehicle* but, in fact, ideological through and through. This is apparent in his comments on the nature of the *signifiant* and the *signifié* (usually translated

into English, since 1959, potentially confusingly, as ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’). Nevertheless, Barthes’ formulations in this area are the subject of some questions regarding their consistency and their Saussurean credentials. One reason for this is suggested by Roy Harris: that Barthes came to Saussure relatively late and that his understanding of the Saussurean sign was already refracted through the lens of his reading of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Jakobson, Martinet, Benveniste and, especially, Hjelmslev (2003, p. 136). Certainly, the latter is influential in Barthes theory of the sign, beyond even the conceptions of denotation and connotation. Barthes, for example, introduces accurate definitions of the *signifiant* and *signifié*, but immediately reframes their operation in terms of *form*, *substance*, *plane of expression* and *plane of content* (cf. Hjelmslev 1970).

Barthes is initially very clear about the *signifiant* and *signifié*: they are an acoustic image and a mental concept, respectively. He underlines the latter, in fact, by writing “the signified [*signifié*] is not a thing but a mental representation of the thing” (1967a, p. 42). However, Harris points out that while Barthes’ formulations about the internal relations in the sign are unexceptional, his definition of what the sign (*signe*) is, concentrating on the relation between *signifiant* and *signifié*, misses its mark. For Harris, Barthes

fails to see that for Saussure the *signe* is indeed not only a linguistic unit but *the* linguistic unit, and not a mere ‘rapport’ between its constituent parts. *A fortiori*, the fundamental Saussurean tenet that in *la langue* semiological relations take priority over – and determine – units sinks without trace in Barthes’ exposition . . . Barthes had not only missed the most original theoretical feature of Saussure’s account of linguistic structure, but reinstated precisely the concept that Saussure was at pains to reject, i.e. the sign as a mere correlation between antecedently given items (formal and semantic) (2003, p. 141).

Yet, Barthes’ placing of the sign before the semiological relations of *la langue* has a further twist which has been undoubtedly influential and has served to distort the picture for those who take the account in *Elements of Semiology* to be the definitive exposition of Saussure. In drawing attention to the “nature of the signifier [*signifiant*]”, Barthes writes that

it is purely a *relatum*, whose definition cannot be separated from that of the signified [*signifié*]. The only difference is that the signifier is a mediator: some matter is necessary to it. But on the one hand it is not sufficient to it, and on the other, in semiology, the signifier can, too, be relayed by a certain matter: that of the word. This materiality of the signifier makes it once more necessary to distinguish clearly *matter* from *substance*: a substance can be immaterial (in the case of the substance of the

content); therefore, all one can say is that the substance of the signifier is always material (sounds, objects, images) (1967a, p. 47).

It is fairly clear why Barthes makes this un-Saussurean assertion about the *signifiant* and, indeed, he is not shy about it:

In semiology, where we shall have to deal with mixed systems in which different kinds of matter are involved (sound and image, object and writing, etc.), it may be appropriate to collect together all the signs, *inasmuch as they are borne by one and the same matter*, under the concept of the *typical sign*: the verbal sign, the graphic sign, the iconic sign, the gestural sign are all typical signs (1967a, p. 47)

For Barthes, the business of establishing a semiology in which verbal and nonverbal signs can be considered equally leads him to over-ride the fundamental principle of Saussure in which the relations within the linguistic sign are purely mental. This is probably the most characteristic feature of Barthes' theory of the sign although, unfortunately, the fact that *Elements of Semiology* has often been treated as a faithful explication of Saussure rather than as a manifesto, has prompted the erroneous belief that Saussure's *signifiant* is the same as Barthes' (see, for example, Bignell 1997; Copley 1996).

The fault for these enduring misunderstandings in semiology (and semiotics) cannot be laid entirely at Barthes' door, of course. There have been a number of factors involved. The first was the translation of Saussure's *Cours* into English in 1959 and the rendering of *signifiant*, *signifié* and *signe* as 'signifier', 'signified' and 'sign'. The first item gave the impression to English natives that the *signifiant* was anything that did the work of signifying or, to put it another way, a sign – precisely the formulation that Saussure wanted to avoid. The term for the *signifié*, at the same, seemed to be anything that was the object of signification. At a stroke, Saussure's psychological conception of the sign was lost and versions of semiology were given free rein to look at all manner of cultural artefacts as if they embodied a *signifié/signifiant* relationship. (By the time of Harris' superior, 1983 translation of the *Cours*, the damage had already been done). Secondly, the re-orientation or misconstrual of the *signifiant* as 'material' was taken up with such enthusiasm that slippages from 'sound pattern' to 'sound' in some early English accounts of semiology (Culler 1975; Coward and Ellis 1977; Hall et al 1980) were all too prevalent and were to be exacerbated in later primers (Dyer 1982; Fiske 1990; Bignell 1997; Hall 1997; Copley 1997). Of course, the *signifiant* as a material entity entailed that writing (material word/vehicles on the page), photographs (colour on paper), film (light projected onto a screen), television (particles of colour displayed in a cathode ray tube) became ever more suitable for analysis in terms of this formulation of

signifié/signifiant, or rather, signified/signifier relation. This was a Barthesian, rather than a Saussurean semiology – it can never really be known precisely how the latter would look given the curious origins of the *Cours*.

Another feature of Barthes' revision of Saussure concerns the vaunted 'arbitrariness' of relations in the sign and, here, Barthes takes his cue from Benveniste and then Martinet. In respect of the word *ox*, Barthes suggests, after Benveniste, that the relation of *signifiant* and *signifié* "is by no means arbitrary (for no French person is free to modify it), indeed, it is, on the contrary, necessary" (1967a, p. 50). Ultimately, however, Barthes suggests that the relation is one that is determined by different degrees of 'motivation'. An unmotivated system, he argues, is one where signs are not founded by convention but by unilateral decision; so, for him, signs in *la langue* are not unmotivated but signs in the world of *fashion* (where there is an elite organizing body) are. Signs are motivated, on the other hand, when the relation between *signifiant* and *signifié* is analogical (1967a, p. 51). This is, once more, evidence of Barthes' attempt to smooth the transition from Saussure's linguistic sign to a general semiology containing, for example, pictorial signs whose *signifiant/signifié* relation is, frequently and unavoidably, one of motivation. The argument is a vexed one, but it has clearly been influential: it surfaces, for example, in Gunther Kress' seminal 1993 essay on critical discourse analysis, the power of whose argument is only minimally vitiated by the consensual, rather than strictly Saussurean, understanding of what 'signified' and 'signifier' consist of in semiotics.

The main point for both Barthes and those who use his semiological analysis in media study is that there is an analytic unity in his theory of both verbal and nonverbal signs. The ravages of ideology, when exposed, would be less convincing if they were distributed unevenly across different kinds of signifying system. Indeed, Barthes' justly famous essays on photography are important in this respect since they indicate that the denotative sign enacts a motivated relationship often as if it were in the service of 'validating' the injustice of the connotative sign, establishing its literalness and helping to *ground* ideology. In identifying and analysing Barthes theory of the sign as distinct from Saussure's, then, it is crucial to recognize these imperatives. Nevertheless, it is still the case that Barthes' work is taught as though it is a faithful extension of Saussure's sign theory.

Undoubtedly, the possibilities offered for exposing and critiquing ideology by Barthes' sign theory were attractive to the post-1968 generation of academics teaching communications, media and cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Students might be set exercises in which the task was to unmask the mythologizing excesses of advertising, for example, in a way

which would empower them against the myths perpetrated by the media in general, and empower them in a way which, supposedly, was unavailable to the 'masses' who did not go to university and learn the methods of semiology. In the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, as European governments' policies changed to encourage a massive expansion of student numbers, teaching Barthes in this way was far less tenable; yet, this was how his work continued to be treated on communications, media and cultural studies courses.

One reason for the persistence of approaches to Barthes as a semiologist might be the decline of focus on 'ideology' (replaced, generally, by the term 'discourse' in a quasi-Foucauldian reading). Barthes' concept of 'myth' enabled the discussion of widely held 'false' ideas without necessarily becoming embroiled in questions of defining ideology as a material factor in the way that people live their lives. The example that Barthes uses in 'Myth today', that of a photograph on the cover of *Paris-Match* of a black Algerian soldier saluting the French flag, has served numerous commentators as a prime example of the pervasive nature of myth, from Coward and Ellis (1977, pp. 27-9) through Deacon et al (1999, pp. 144-5). Weedon et al deal with Barthes' version of myth better than most. They write

Barthes' principal aim in *Mythologies* was to provide a basis for a critique of the 'naturalizing effect' of ideology, its quality of *vraisemblance*. For example, even though she or he may be critical of its connotations, the reader of *Paris-Match* nevertheless believes its denoted 'truth': this event took place, it has a real history and so, in a sense, the soldier's behaviour is 'only natural'. Barthes locates this 'very principle of myth in the relations between his two orders of signification. The denoted signified establishes the reality of the ideology; it allows myth to be innocently consumed (1980, p. 180).

What is made clear, here, is that denotation carries out the real work of myth: it provides the 'natural', 'credible', 'realistic' element of representation. However, some media studies versions of *Mythologies* are not so clear. There is a tendency to assume that denotation and connotation exist in a linear, mechanistic relation whereby connotations are conspiratorial supplements working upon simple denotations. Bignell attempts to explain myth with the following:

It is as if myth were a special form of language which takes up an existing sign system and makes a new sign system out of it. As we shall see, myth is not an innocent language, but one that picks up existing signs and their connotations, and orders them purposefully to play a social role (1997, pp. 16-17)

He adds, “A set of iconic signs which already possess a meaning (‘a black soldier is giving the French salute’) becomes the basis for the imposition of an important social message, that French imperial rule is fair and egalitarian” (1997, p. 23). Putting the cart before the horse in this way is characteristic of a great deal of the writing on mythologies in Anglophone media studies (cf. Fiske 1990, pp. 85-91 and, to a slightly lesser extent, Dyer 1982, p. 128). Not only is it an inaccurate representation of Barthes’ position, it is also a smugly conservative form of analysis. Surely, Barthes had implicated the bourgeoisie sufficiently to prevent the need to see myth as a conscious conspiracy.

Ironically, years before Barthes’ initial conception of myth was being taken up by cultural critics and media theorists in Britain and North America, he had already shifted the emphasis of his analyses. The misgivings of Barthes about semiological studies that Jackson (1991, p. 124) refers to, are, Jackson implies, a result of Barthes later arguments regarding the notion of the *text* and the increasing focus on *writing*. But it is apparent that Barthes’ objections to the original project of *Mythologies* are both more historical and explicitly political. In his 1971 retrospective on *Mythologies*, Barthes argued that the identification and uncovering of myths was no longer sufficient in the post-1968 world. Myths had become easily recognizable and their exposure a routine exercise. Barthes therefore recommended that work should proceed on the identification of ‘sociolects’. The task of semiology was

No longer simply to *upend* (or *right*) the mythical message, to stand it back on its feet, with denotation at the bottom and connotation at the top, nature on the surface and class interest deep down, but rather to change the object itself, to produce a new object, point of departure for a new science . . . (1977d, p. 169).

For Barthes, “denunciation, demystification (demythification)” (1977d, p. 166) of the bourgeois and the petit bourgeois had become, itself, a mythological *doxa*. ‘Mythoclasm’ was succeeded by ‘semioclasm’, he claimed, and what was needed was a far-reaching interrogation of *all* sign systems and a *challenge* to their very basis. This would not simply entail unravelling the connection of denotation and connotation but a more thorough assault on the mechanics of meaning at the very level of the sign itself. For many, this is the very crux of contemporary semiotics.

Semioclasm remains rather a rare phenomenon in British universities. Instead, the semiological (and ideological) analysis that Barthes had already forsaken by 1971, identifying it as conservative and historical, has become, for a complex of reasons, entrenched. The poststructuralist work of Barthes on textuality, by contrast, has simply had fewer classroom applications as well as being perceived as quasi-mystical in its claims for the power of the

text. Yet, aside from *Mythologies* and *Image-Music-Text*, it is probably true to say that the most famous, though less frequently read, of Barthes' books in Britain is *S/Z* (1974). The book might belong to the 'later' Barthes, but as an extension of his crypto-Saussurean sign theory, it is quite illustrative. The problematic nature of what it has to say about textuality is more illustrative, still, especially within the sphere of British communications, media and cultural studies where the study of audiences and reception has been so prominent on the agenda of the last twenty years. Sadly, though, some of the far-reaching arguments of *S/Z* seem to have been confined to a kind of wilderness, partly because of their association with a specific configuration of arguments that has been left behind by media study (although the relation was fairly tangential in the first place) and by theory in general.

It would be easy to imagine that Barthes set out to write a death knell for realism when he wrote *S/Z*, bringing to theoretical fruition his early project of promoting modern writing. Certainly, the elitist posturing in one corner of British intellectual life would have encouraged such a belief. Probably the main conduit for French theory a few years after the time that *S/Z* was published in France and when it was published in English translation was the cinema journal, *Screen*. The journal had evolved an editorial policy which was built on a fusion of Althusserian Marxism, a feminism unhindered by questions of class and a blinkered version of psychoanalysis (diluted Lacan). It was also a promoter of modern French literature and theory in general (see Britton 1979; Easthope 1982; McDonnell and Robins 1980). Among its Francophile editors was Stephen Heath, editor and translator of the essays in *Image-Music-Text*. Like Barthes, *Screen* invoked the name of Bertholt Brecht, especially in relation to the journal's great shibboleth, 'radical' cinema. Heath, in particular, promoted 'radical', alienating representation over realism (see, also, Heath 1981).

Screen's anti-realist stance and its promotion of French theory, created a fortuitous birthing pool for the arrival of the English translation of *S/Z*. Heath's fellow editor, Colin MacCabe, extended the anti-realism critique in two articles in particular (1974, 1977) and a book (1978), demonstrating how certain texts can serve to disrupt subject positions and others serve only to maintain them. He argues (1974) that the nineteenth-century novel provides a model for a kind of text (literary, cinematic or televisual) which, through the erection of an internal hierarchy, purports to be able to accurately narrate the real. MacCabe called this model 'the classic realist text'. The central idea for this critique of realism actually derives from Benveniste more than Barthes but, along with *S/Z*, it would supposedly put realism to the sword.

Yet, three decades later, such an expectation seems foolhardy. Indeed, the failure to learn the lessons of *S/Z* is an emblem of neither the 'early' or the 'late' Barthes, but the Barthes that has

been lost. It is a lesson that could be replayed in communications, media and cultural studies and is certainly a lesson for theory in general. It might even have rescued Barthes from his status in Britain as “the distinguished intellectual middleman who popularised structuralism and semiology” (Jackson 1991, p. 167). In the opening pages of *S/Z*, Barthes formulates two kinds of texts, the *readerly* and the *writerly*, where the reader is respectively an idle *consumer* of the signs in the text or a diligent *producer* of them, almost rewriting what is presented (1974, pp. 3-4). So far, this seems to accord with the *Screen* project; it is also an acknowledgement of the role of the reader or audience in textuality. Barthes goes so far as to actively advocate the ‘writerly’ text in a utopian fashion that would sit well with some of *Screen*’s contributors as well as a number of prominent poststructuralists. Curiously, however, the intense analysis which follows these formulations and makes up the majority of the book produces implicitly conflicting conclusions about both realism and the value of strictly ‘writerly’ texts.

As is well known, *S/Z* dissects a Balzac short story, ‘Sarrasine’, dividing it up into very brief segments and elaborating five codes through whose matrix the text passes. But what is less well comprehended is that rather than yielding a definitive statement on the poverty of realism and its tendency to closure, the analysis of the story opens up further questions. The result is to expose an abundance of meanings, making a text which might have been billed as a ‘simple realist narrative’ into one which now threatens to be eminently ‘writerly’. As part of the repertoire of burgeoning poststructuralism, one would expect that Barthes’ formulations in this book have some consequences at the level of the sign. Yet is not clear whether Barthes set out to demonstrate that ‘realist’ texts – exemplified by ‘Sarrasine’ – are somehow characterized by signs that purport to possess a ‘stable’, one-to-one *signifiant/signifié* relationship. Moreover, if this was Barthes’ intention then it is clear that the final delivery of *S/Z* stymied it. The Saussurean version of the sign was by no means complicit with ‘readerly’ texts; indeed, the analysis might suggest that poststructuralist versions of the sign were not guaranteed to produce ‘writerly’ texts.

The same lesson was partially learned a little later in the post-*Screen* environment, specifically the arguments, supposedly supported by Barthes and others, that had been put forth about realism. The main problem with the conception of the ‘classic realist text’ was that it *underestimated* ‘realism’. If one were to compare MacCabe’s arguments to those of Barthes in *S/Z* then there can be little doubt that the *readerly* corresponds to ‘classic realism’ and the *writerly* can be mapped onto the ‘radical’ or ‘revolutionary’ text. In a cogent and coruscating essay, David Lodge (1981) effectively put the notion of the ‘classic realist text’ out of its misery. Marshalling the implicit argument of *S/Z* identified above – that a great richness of interpretation was to be culled from the scrutiny of a realist text – Lodge insisted that ‘realist’

fiction, as an instance of representation, privileged or not, was still open to audiences' *writerly* proclivities. In his challenge to the fundamental tenet of 'classic realism', partly mobilised through Bakhtin's invocation of 'voice', Lodge stressed that meaning, even in narratives which profess to be 'realist', is potentially multiplicitous. The idea that there could be one authoritative meaning to be derived from a narrative as the 'classic realist text' thesis seemed to suggest, was shown to be untenable.

There are good and simple reasons for seeing Barthes' work on textuality aligned with the broad argument of Lodge against the wholesale denigration of realism. The recognition of the multiplicity of texts also acts as a signal of the importance of the reader in enacting textuality. This latter theme, as has been noted, has been more or less dominant in communications, media and cultural studies over the last couple of decades (following, but not necessarily caused by, Barthes' later work). The theme was central to Barthes' ruminations on the pleasure of the text, but it was present from an early stage of his semiological period, too. It is certainly implicit in *Mythologies* and explicit in later essays such as 'The rhetoric of the image' and 'The photographic message' where texts are shown to be anchored by various devices because of their very richness of interpretation. The process of denotation (and also the procedures used to produce *connotations* in photography), have been seen as the perfidious agent of representation, giving texts a stability of meaning which is not inherent to them. It would not be too much of a simplification to say that *Screen* and others grasped this process and vigorously swept it away into a formalist cul-de-sac. Meanwhile, the teaching of semiotics in the last three decades of Anglophone communications, media and cultural studies, embraced the critical/ideological dimension of Barthes' observations on textuality and held on so tight that it failed to notice how history had rendered semiological analysis of this kind somewhat reactionary.

Barthes' fate in Anglophone academia and in middle-brow circles has been overdetermined by the popularity of his work in communications, media and cultural studies. As argued, Barthes' reputation has been caught up in an ongoing situation deriving from the ease with which his semiological analysis could be fitted into certain kinds of pedagogy, especially because of the grounding of his work in the everyday; the strategy of the publishers of Barthes translations; the pre-existing cult of the French intellectual; the case of mistaken identity by which he was taken to be the amanuensis for Saussure and for structuralism; along with a host of other political and ideological factors which made Barthes' particular brand of critique welcome in Britain and North America during the 1970s and 1980s. One of these latter which has not been discussed is the way that communications, media and cultural studies represented a collage of the many things which could not be done within the disciplinary

boundaries of literary study (see Easthope 1991), and how this allowed the transformation of Barthes from intellectual maverick to pivotal cultural critic.

The ironic destiny of Barthes' *oeuvre* in the formation described above, is to have been 'closed off'. On the one hand, Barthes is a prophet of multiplicity for communications, media and cultural studies: he opened the way for linguistic analysis to be extended into a semiology that covered verbal and nonverbal communication. But, immediately, on the other hand, his work shows closure to be in force everywhere: from the relationship of the *signifié* and the *signifiant*, through denotation, to the constrictions of realism. Undoubtedly, such processes of closure are not always easy to identify and, when they are unmasked, the act can afford some pleasure to the spectator and s/he who does the unmasking. However, revealing the vicissitudes of openness and multiplicity is a far more difficult task. The dichotomy of closure/stability/realism/readerly and openness/multiplicity/modernist anti-realism/ writerly can certainly be seen in Barthes' writings in English; unfortunately, the trajectory of his career in communications, media and cultural studies has been dictated by the logics of exposing the former element of the dichotomy. Where the latter has been extolled it is at the expense of an almost summary dismissal of the former.

Most commentators agree that the writing of the 'late' Barthes seemed to have abandoned leftist principles, the antipathy to bourgeois culture and, certainly, semiological analysis. Clearly, works such as *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977e) and *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) appear to be mere works of belles-lettres rather than works of critique. Furthermore, one would not necessarily exhort communications, media and cultural studies in the English-speaking world to urgently take on board Barthes' ruminations on the peculiarities of writing. However, the continued focus on *Mythologies* and Barthes' semiological analysis has had a retrogressive effect: with reference to Barthes' *oeuvre* as a whole and, more importantly, with reference to the field of semiotics in Britain, Australia and some areas of North America. That Barthes should call for a *semioclasm* to replace *mythoclasm* after 1968 is not surprising: disdain for the bourgeoisie had become too easy; it was almost a fashion and it fell victim to the same strategy by which advertising and marketing thoroughly incorporated counter-culture rhetoric and style. As such, it is not surprising, either, that *mythoclasm* caught on in the academy – safely ensconced in the universities, it was easy to scoff at the consumerism of mass society and especially convenient to attribute various social ills to the media, a centuries-old refuge of the laziest thinkers.

Yet, what if all semiosis demanded scrutiny? Not just the media artefacts which sustained the bourgeoisie, but all practices sustained by signs (including those inside the university)? What

if semiosis could be identified and analysed without recourse to the master rules of the human language faculty? What if semiosis took place beyond the domains of humans, into the world of animals, plants and small organisms? What if the picture of evolution on the planet had to be adjusted in light of the findings about semiosis? What might happen to the social Darwinist arguments that often underpin class society then? What if semiosis among all organisms completely invalidated the ideology of liberal individualism and revealed the propensity towards collective identity among living creatures? And what if the fact that humans are the only organisms with an awareness of their semiotic capacities forces humans into a 'semioethics'? These are not small questions; and they are not necessarily questions that Barthes would have had on the tip of his tongue in the early 1970s. However, they are questions which are absolutely central to semiotics in the present, in the wider international community rather than in the parochial confines of 'semiotics' as it is understood in much of the Anglophone academy. They result from the kind of focus on the sign that Barthes was beginning to advocate.

Barthes' call for *semioclasm* came shortly after the formation of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in 1969, where semioticians such as Thomas A. Sebeok broadened the entire agenda of sign study by encouraging its application to the whole of life.

Notwithstanding the experience of 1968, it cannot be a coincidence that Barthes moved away from *mythoclasm* at this point, even if he was not directly asking the really big questions that came to characterize international semiotics. Yet, his 'retreat' into the text and writing, taken in this context, was not entirely without its political co-ordinates. What if realism – surely the dominant and most popular form of representation, judging by a number of factors, including its longevity – had many more dimensions than was hitherto assumed and offered myriad opportunities for audience investment? What if realism's connection to the quotidian suggested that the everyday lives of people were not only far more rich and imaginative than had been assumed in the academy but that they were also the terrain of political struggle? One might easily read Barthes' later work on the text and writing as attempts to address these questions despite the fact that it attempts to skirt the issue by maintaining a hierarchy of readerly/writerly. Thus, highly personal writings such as *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* and *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* start to make more sense as exemplars or personal politics.

Barthes, it seems, has been responsible for the stagnation and even the death of semiotics in communications, media and cultural studies after semiotics' initial moment of fashion. This, of course, is an absurd conclusion: it was *what was done to Barthes' work* in a peculiarly overdetermined intellectual, cultural and social conjuncture that dictated this outcome. It is clear that the trajectory of Barthes' very career has been the subject of all manner of

confusions and misunderstandings as well as desires and yearnings. Taking Barthes' semiological phase as the whole of his work is just one error; but for a discipline as well as a middle-brow national intellectual tradition to mistake this for semiotics in its entirety, as has seemed to happen in Britain, is very unfortunate indeed. If communications, media and cultural studies in Anglophone academia is to make any progress, given the centrality of textuality and meaning to its very object and given the ongoing impasse of audience study and political economy, it is left with only one option: to forget Barthes. Or, alternatively, to remember Barthes' call for *semioclasm* and to get on with semiotics.

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