

Roland Barthes's distinctive approach to cultural analysis

Summary:

The aim of this paper is to study Roland Barthes's distinctive approach to cultural analysis through the reading of three of his books and which have a cultural aspect and they are:

Mythologies, Fashion system, the empire of signs.

The author's approach is distinctive because of his mobility. Each book is a departure, not a consolidation of his earlier arguments.

He relates his cultural analysis with the practice of writing trying to make it most enjoyable. He has a superb sense of what will surprise, and he surprises people by using an excellent style of writing.

AMOKRANE Abderrezak

Maître – Assistant chargé de cours

Département de Sociologie

Faculté des lettres et sciences sociales

Université Ferhat ABBAS SETIF

Introduction:

Who is Roland Barthes? The answer one might give is: He is a french structuralist. The importance of this answer lies in the fact that it helps us to localize Barthes's works within a particular theoretical sphere, that is to say, structuralism which is the most important moment in his career, the source of his influence and the fruition of projects and attitudes. Therefore, the attempt to study what is distinctive in Barthes's approach in cultural analysis must be carried out with reference to structuralism. On the other hand this attempt does not imply a necessity to make comparaisons with external theoretical elements, let say, marxism for example, not

ملخص:

أثارت كتابات المفكر الفرنسي رولان بارتس منذ الستينات، نقاشا واسعا في فرنسا وخارجها وصعب على النقاد تصنيف وتحديد طبيعة أفكاره نظرا لأن كل كتاب من كتبه يمثل قطعة مع البقية، إلا أن هناك شبه إجماع حصل حول انتمائه إلى البنية. إن المقالة ليس لها الطموح في دراسة مجمل عمل رولان بارتس الثري والغزير، بل ستهتم بمساهمته في التحليل الثقافي والتي تبقى على درجة كبيرة من التميز. تبرز المساهمة هذه في ثلاثة من كتبه والتي يغلب عليها الطابع الثقافي والتي تتبع فيها المفكر الأسطورة وتأثيرها الكبير على الأفراد، ودرس الموضة وبين أفا شكل من أشكال اللغة، وأخيرا وفي كتابه الملخص للمجتمع الياباني أبرز ثقافة تبني على ما هو سطحي وخارجي مقابل الثقافة الغربية التي تبحث دوما على ما هو خفي، وما هو عميق.

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because they are irrelevant for such attempt, but because making such comparisons is beyond the concern of this paper. Thus my essay aspires to undertake an internal analysis of some of Barthes's works which seem to have a purely cultural aspect; they are: Mythologies, Fashion system and The empire of signs⁽¹⁾.

It is, indeed, through the examination of these works that one can discover the central aspects of Barthes's cultural analysis. The aim of such procedure is to avoid the polemical discussions built around Barthes: There is no agreement how to assess his work. In other words, Barthes is a figure of contradiction, famous for contradictory reasons:

For many he is a writer who stands for the pleasure of reading and promotes literature which gives the reader a creative role. For others he is the promoter of semiology, and for the rest he is either a mythologist or literary historian⁽²⁾. My essay therefore will simply be a short introduction to the immense and varied work of Barthes.

Structuralism and semiology

One of the features of contemporary intellectual development is the increasing importance given to the study of language as an essential phenomenon for the understanding of consciousness and social life. Language is seen not only as sounds or written texts, but all meaningful social practices and cultural phenomena are considered particular kinds of language. Hence, several attempts have been developed taking into account in a way or another, the linguistic significance of social practices.

The common root of these attempts is the projected general science of signs conceived by F. de Saussure in his "Cours de linguistique générale" in the early years of the last century⁽³⁾. The conception he developed insisted upon the concepts of system and structure. He introduced a distinction between language (*langue*) and (*parole*) speech: Language is defined as a formal system of oppositions which underlies speech. This system is constituted by unmotivated or arbitrary signs which are related to one another, whereas speech is an individual act of selection. Therefore, language is an autonomous object, stable and independent of the use that individuals make of it.

Furthermore, language makes speech intelligible, and gives a basic consistency to changing speech. Having asserted that language is the foundation of actual speech, Saussure emphasized the importance of synchrony over diachrony. Whereas the synchronic aspects of a structure are underlied by a system of stable relations, the diachronic aspects are stressed by the changing speech.

Treating cultural phenomena as the products of systems of rules and distinctions, structuralism takes from Saussure two major principles. Firstly, signifying entities are defined by networks of internal and external relations, and the study of signifying phenomena is to describe the system of forms that makes them possible. *Secondly, what the structural explanation discusses is the structure and significance of particular objects or actions by relating them to the system within which they function.* Historical antecedents and causes are left out.

The important thing to mention is that semiology, the general science of signs proposed by Saussure remained just an idea until 1960 S where Barthes Sought the cause of its sterility not only theoretically but through a tentative empirical application. In Saussure's view, the difficulties of linguistics would be solved by a general semiology of which linguistics would be only a part. By contrast, Barthes considers semiology a part of linguistics. The most significant contribution Barthes made to semiology is that semiology changes from a promotion of science of signs to an activity on its margin.

Semiology, has somehow a new task, that is of trying itself out. Barthes tries out linguistic concepts he considers useful in studying other signifying phenomena. He started this in *Mythologies* where he discovered that linguistic terms could give him a new perspective on cultural phenomena and since then he espoused the possibility of studying human activity as a series of languages. Barthes's semiology approach will be discussed when I'll present his ideas given in *Mythologies*.

For now, the main themes of structuralism must be briefly outlined since they are an essential background to Barthes's work⁽⁴⁾.

Man and Structures

All structuralists agree that the structures they claim to have discovered share three properties: Totality, transformation and self-regulation. Within these structures man does not act, think or speak, he is "acted" "thought" and "spoken". Structuralism is a denial of the possibility of choice. It stresses the duality between unconscious system and human practice, between structure and human will. For Levi-Strauss myths think themselves out in men and without being known for them. In Lacan's writings, the subject is destroyed and man is defined by his "radical eccentricity to himself".

Lacan stressed the irreducible character of the unconscious and the primacy of language in the constitution of the subject. Individual and collective subject are presented as the place where the effects of organizations which escape the subjects are manifested, where the combinatorial play of elements appears.

During the rise of structuralism, that is, from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s, France saw profound social changes, and for a while the 'speaking subject' seemed to be a passive subject in the consumer society. It is this, certainly, which might explain such a conception of man in structuralism.

Structuralism and history

Structuralism asserts the primacy of structure over history.

History has a discontinuous aspect. The constant stress in structuralism is on the constitutive role of established institutions and their inability to account for change except as something accidental and irrational. In other words history is considered as disorder of basic structures and can only be understood by reference to these structures.

During the rise of structuralism, history as a branch of knowledge was developing quickly and scene of much theoretical and methodological activity. The contribution came from Michel Foucault who liked to think of himself as a historian. Barthes published many articles in the main french historical journal 'Les annales'. These contributions aimed to improve the laws of the world and those of the mind, in a historical perspective. The series of articles written by Louis Althusser and his disciples in "For marx"

and "Reading capital' were used to give a more precise meaning to the marxist 'Reading' of society⁽⁵⁾.

In the next sections, I will deal with three of Barthes's books and they are mythologies, Fashion system and the empire of signs which have in common the theme of language and in particular Saussure's assumption that the sign is always a matter of historical and cultural convention.

The sign which Barthes considers as "healthy" is the one which presents its own arbitrariness, which does not presents itself as "natural", but on contrary communicates something of its artificial status.

Mythologies is a political book because Barthes proves in it that signs are working ideologically in the sense that they offer themselves as the only way of viewing the world.

"Naturalizing" social reality and making it seem as innocent and static as nature itself is one of the function of ideology, which, thus, seeks to convert culture into nature by using the 'natural' sign as a weapon.

1 - The analysis of myth.

Mythologies contains two parts: The first one is the entire articles Barthes wrote between 1954 and 1956 called "mythology of the month" for les "lettres nouvelles". The second part that he calls "myth today" is a synchronic study of myth, the method of reading myth.

In part one, Barthes's method is to seize on some apparently innocent item such as guide books, astrology, the latest model of citroen, the image of plastic emerging in 1950 S, EINSTEIN'S brain - and bring out the morality it embodies. To use other words, each article in this book starts with the presentation of the detail that indicates the presence of a myth and what follows is a description of what makes myth attractive. Slowly, description turns to analysis and the last sentences are used to denounce the content of the myth.

As one goes on reading mythologies, the essays begin to refer to each other and show homogeneity of a corpus for research. What emerges from my reading of Mythologies is that Barthes in discussing aspects of culture, sought to analyse the social stereotypes taken as natural and to reveal the ideological implications of what seems natural: Wine in France is not just one drink among others, Drinking wine is a ritual of social integration.

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Two steps can be distinguished in Barthes presentations of myth: The first one is showing myth as delusion, and the second is presenting myth as a form of communication, a "language", a system of second-order meaning. What emerges also from mythologies and as a consequence of the variety of phenomena Barthes considers as myth – is that everything can be a myth.

Finally, in asserting that myth is a form of communication, Barthes, I think, is much more concerned with the way the messages are constituted and transmitted than with their medium.

Among all the articles of mythologies, "The world of wrestling" and "the family of man" are the most convincing.

The world of wrestling

In this article, Barthes compares two physically similar activities: Wrestling and boxing. Wrestling is a spectacle, boxing is a sports and what would explain the difference is the complex set of cultural conventions that makes wrestling a spectacle rather than a contest.

What are the characteristics of boxing and wrestling? In boxing the interest is directed toward the final outcome. The visible suffering of the fighters is taken as a sign of an imminent defeat. Rules in boxing are external to the match. In wrestling the outcome is only of interest for its dramatic signification. No one would be shocked to learn that matches are fixed. Rules are very much within the match. They are violated visibly. Suffering must be exaggerated.

The major factors that separate wrestling from boxing are the notions of intelligibility and of justice. What attracts Barthes in wrestling is mainly its artificial aspect not only in its signs of pain, anger and distress but even in its outcome. Wrestling has an excessive aspect in that sense that the movements of wrestlers are unambiguous, whereas our daily life is full of wholly ambiguous signs. Wrestlers are acting out situations and emotions which can never exist in real life. They are making life intelligible. Wrestling is a spectacle, in Barthes view, whose main function is to enable people to take time out from the real life.

The notion of justice is not less important in wrestling : The wrestler who breaks the rules when it suits him and claims their protection when it is in his interest to do so, is often defeated at the end of the match and the audience is delighted.

The family of man.

The family of man is the title of a collection of photographs known as such in English, but the french organisers gave another title to it "La grande famille des hommes" which means "The great human family". Barthes argues that the organisers show all human activities as natural, all types of work as logically the same, all conditions of men united in a common brotherhood. Barthes attacks this view arguing that in all human cultures there was always poor men and rich men and, whereas the former die the latter live.

What Barthes seems to reject in the exhibition of the photographs collection, is that cultural events are presented as natural, spontaneous and inevitable ones. By doing so, the authors of the collection imprison their readers in a vision of a human society which denies the fact that cultures are subject to historical change. In fact, Barthes's attack is against the use of language: By translating "The family of man" as "La grande famille des hommes", the organisers, "moralised and sentimentalised" what was a neutral expression.

One can mention other articles from *Mythologies* to demonstrate Barthes's rejection of the natural reading of cultures, but since their implication is the same, the two examples presented above are sufficient.

For the time being, let me present some conclusions I have drawn from my reading of *Mythologies*.

a). *Mythologies* is a book of cultural demystification. The use of the word demystification implies the presence of a mystification.

Barthes attacks those who present their values as universal ones, not the values of a particular class in a given society at a given moment of history. Mystification means to give historical or cultural phenomena the appearance of natural ones. Demystification is to demonstrate the methods by which people have been tricked.

b). Demystification can be related to another notion, that is of "Forgetting". The implication of Barthes's work is to forget the meanings that seem natural to us and therefore we must convince ourselves that they are cultural products. They are so familiar that they can pass unnoticed. 'Forgetting' process is a way to challenge received opinions, ways of making the world intelligible, and to propose new perspectives.

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c). *Mythologies* proposes implicitly a particular definition of the "mythologue" (Barthes, maybe). I have the impression that through this book Barthes is saying: Since you are the poor victims of mystification, I want to help you. Read this book, it would be useful to educate you and show you how myths can be detected. So, from being consumers of myths, I will convert you into readers of them.

d). From the variety of subjects that Barthes had presented as myths one could draw the conclusion that everything can be a myth. The list is still open.

e). Barthes presents social myths as being bad not only because of their content but because being received ideas, they impoverish the imagination of those who receive them. The power of people to ask questions and transform their world has been stolen from them.

These are the conclusions I have drawn from my reading of the first part of *Mythologies*. However, the reading of *Mythologies* would not be complete without presenting the content of "myth today" which is the second part of the book. In this part, Barthes shows how myth is structured and propose ways to read it.

The structure of myth.

In analyzing the structure of myth, Saussure's model of the sign appears useful to Barthes who stresses that the model is made up of three elements not two: The signifier, the signified, and the sign itself, a new entity born of the union of the other two. Let's take the example he gives to clarify these three elements.

Let's suppose that I am looking at a magazine (*Paris match*) and I see in the front page a photograph of a black soldier in french uniform saluting the french flag. In fact, I receive two messages at once: The first is the various components of the picture 'read' by me as "black soldier, french uniform, french flag". The second message is the defense of french imperialism.

A historical context is needed to explain this second message. This picture appeared during the time when the french colonial empire was breaking up around the world. So, the message of the picture in Barthes's view is that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without distinction of colour, serve faithfully beneath her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of a supposed colonialism, than the zeal of this negro to serve his oppressors.

We see that in this example the signification of the first system, the sign proper (a magazine illustration of a coloured soldier in uniform saluting the french flag) is somehow emptied of its substance in order to be used as a mere signifier of the second system. However, the photograph of the black soldier can be read by different persons in different ways, one could object. Barthes resolves the problem by presenting ways by which myth can be read.

Reading myth.

In order to illustrate the various readings which can be made of myth, Barthes uses a metaphor: "if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane". In the same way, I can produce three different types of readings: If I focus on the empty signifier, I read the photograph of the black soldier as an example of french imperialism, if I focus on the full signifier I read it as an alibi of the french imperialism; If I focus on both at the same time I receive this myth as a value and as a 'fact' which makes the value look necessary, natural, innocent. In the second, we have myth seen by the mythologist, who deciphers it and understands its distortion. In the third, we have myth as it should properly be read in order to function at all.

2 - Fashion system.

In this book Barthes proposes a method by which fashion system can be analysed, and presents the components of the system itself. He demonstrates how the singularity of a system can be discovered by patient examination. Once the description of a system is made, it becomes possible to make comparisons with other systems. The first quarter of the book is on method. This methodological prelude has as an aim to define the chosen object.

The object.

Barthes makes a semiological study of "garments as written".

Fashion seemed to him to be written phenomena. What he is interested in is the pure language of fashion seen as a function. Thus the object of fashion system is neither the real garments nor the photographed ones but it is an object "between things and words".

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The impression I have is that Barthes had to deal with the language of fashion because he is convinced that it is through language that people are encouraged to adopt a wrong attitude towards the clothes they wear. The language of fashion, as he observes, seeks not to inform but to persuade, to convince and to create dreams. Barthes wants through fashion system, somehow, to write a complete explanatory grammar of the language of fashion. The various terms which Barthes finds recurring in the descriptions of fashionable clothes in "Vogue, elle, le jardin des modes" correspond to the nouns, adjectives and articles of an ordinary grammar book.

However, the object Barthes tends to study is very restricted: He does not work on articles found in fashion journals, but on fashion captions accompanying fashion photographs, not on written fashion but on a described fashion.

The system.

There are two components of fashion meaning. The vestimentary code and the rhetorical system. The first is a very difficult part to read and summarize, so I am concerned mainly with the ideas contained in the second part.

The rhetorical system.

By this system, Barthes means the phraseology through which fashion magazines try to persuade. We can outline the main ideas contained in this part as follows:

Firstly: The system creates a series of false necessities and functions making them appear as natural requirements which the system satisfies.

- a) The system assigns functions to garments, asserting their "practicability" – "a linen coat for cool summer evenings".
- b) The system use particular kinds of forms to naturalize its signs. Expressions like: (This summer dresses will be of silk; dresses are becoming longer; black mink asserts itself) show how the rhetoric does not name the agents responsible, conceals the causes and treats the arbitrary decisions about what shall be fashionable as facts that have been observed or as phenomena which develop according to some independent and autonomous process.

Secondly: The fashion writers describe the clothes intended to be bought by rich men and poor men in different languages.

In the first case, clothes are described in a language which exactly denotes what they are made of. In the second case, the language used is to enable the reader to dream.

Thirdly: Barthes shows how fashion writers present women in a subordinate role in a men's world. Fashion system specifies what woman is doing, when and where. She must be seen doing something. Even if she is doing nothing she will need appropriate clothes. Secondly, Barthes by assuming that fashion shows woman acting in a 'clean world', implies that the pleasant working conditions hide woman's real identity which is defined as being in the service of man. Finally, the psychological function of fashion enables a person to express what he or she either is or would like to be in such a way that people who are living in the same society will recognize him or her.

What emerges from fashion system is that Barthes argues that it is a myth to pretend that the clothes we wear are natural, realistic and functional, but the wearing of clothes is a cultural attribute. Furthermore, he asserts that wearing clothes is the product of a conscious choice which fashion writers always try to elude.

3 - Japan or the empire of signs.

In the 1960 S, Barthes had the experience of discovering the Japanese culture about which he wrote his book "The empire of signs" with the most enthusiasm. He likes everything about Japan. Cooking is one of the Japanese practices that Barthes considers. In his articles 'water and flake' and "chopsticks", Barthes illustrates how much lighter the Japanese food is, much lighter than the french, never covered with thick sauce or taken into the mouth with spoonfuls. Japanese food is always served almost raw and in such a way that the diner can compose his menu in the order he prefers.

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Take the Japanese face: In the west eyes are taken to be signs of mysterious personality lying behind their beauty, but in Japanese face everything is on the surface; or take the Japanese towns. They are unplanned and unmaped, and where the centre is absent. Take parcels. In Japan it is apparently the wrapping which counts and appreciated, whereas the content may be less important or non-existent. In the west, people like to remove the wrapping as quickly as they can in order to get to the content.

Barthes's version of Japanese culture is that the exterior of a thing is the thing. Japan, in Barthes's view, is a country full of rich and intriguing signifiers whose charm is that they have no signifieds. What Barthes praises in Japanese culture is its refusal to ground its practices in nature, its preference for surface over depth.

Barthes in 'The empire of signs' is constantly making an argument against depth, against- the idea that the most-real is latent, submerged.

Conclusion.

Having outlined the main features of three of Barthes's books, the question now is to which extent Barthes's contribution in cultural analysis is distinctive. If a comparison is made with Lacan and Foucault, one would find they share in common their refusal of the natural reading phenomena and history in their view is discontinuous. The difference between Barthes and Althusser, is that ideology is implicit in the words of the former whereas it is the main concept in the words of the latter. What is distinctive in Barthes approach if we hardly can find something which could differ him from other structuralists?

I believe it is wrong to understand the word 'distinctive' as referring to something new. Barthes's approach is distinctive not because he has brought something new to cultural analysis but distinctive in the sense that Barthes does not construct a definite theoretical position and does not propose methods. What makes distinctive, indeed, is his mobility. He transcends old positions for new ones.

Each new book is a departure, not a consolidation of his earlier arguments. He proposes a science of contemporary myths in mythologies; a semiology in Fashion system; a combination of touristic commentary on Japan and the ethical implications of signs in everyday life in the empire of signs. So, what is distinctive is these various projects which Barthes espoused and intended to alter the way people think about a range of cultural objects⁽⁶⁾.

Notes and Bibliography

(1) - These books were written respectively in 1957, 1964, 1970.

(2) - The reader, may look at the work of a number of writers to have a clear idea about these polemical discussions, among whom we can name: Susan Sontag, Stephen Heath, Jonathan Culler, Annette Lavers, Sturrock.

(3) - We advise the reader to go back to Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London; Methuen, 1977) to have an overview about Saussure's influence.

(4) - The main themes of structuralism are discussed in a great number of books and the summary given in this paper is very superficial. Thus, the reader who needs a solid background must refer to the following books:

- Greimas, A.J, *Semantique structurale*, Paris, Larousse, 1966.
- Levi-Strauss, C., *Structural anthropology*, Allen Lane, 1968.
- Miller, J.A., "Action de la structure", *Cahiers de l'analyse*, vol.9, 1968.
- Saussure, F., *Course in general linguistics*, Fontana, 1974.

(5) - In these two books, Louis Althusser conceives society, or more accurately, a 'social formation' as consisting of a number of relatively autonomous "instances" or levels of social practice- the economic, the political and the ideological. And he has further argued that the essential concern of Marxism is to understand the ways in which these levels of practice interact with one another within concrete historical societies.

- Althusser, L., *For Marx* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1969).
- Althusser, L. and Balibar, E., *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1972).

(6) - These conclusions are very personal. Thus, the reader may have a different view and position towards Barthes's books once he reads them. The reader may also need to read some other books as a support:

- Bennett, Tony; *Culture, Ideology and the Social Process* (London, The Open University Press, 1983).
- Heath, Stephen; *A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London, Fontana, 1972).
- Williams, Raymond; *Culture* (Cambridge, Fontana, 1983).