

A Survey on Roland Barthes' Myth Today*

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Roland Barthes extended Saussure's signified into denotation, connotation, and myth. Both connotation and myth are ideological in culture semiotics; connotation is the rich and colorful exhibition of fashion, values, living attitudes, life style and so on, whilst myth is the total of these connotative meaning—middle class ideology. Both of them belong to the level of surface ideology, dominated by the deep ideology.

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Introduction

As a semiotician, Roland Barthes extended Saussure's signified into denotation, connotation, and myth and applied them into cultural semiotic studies. He attempted to exploit the way of meaning-making in his cultural semiotics in order to search the deep meaning hidden behind the surface meaning in mass media and found that the deep meaning, i.e., Myth Today was historical or cultural, which had close relationship with ideology of the dominant class. Barthes claimed that the seemingly innocent posters, ads, and even all mass cultural materials were not really innocent for they were designed to shape and reshape readers' ideology and to persuade them to accept the dominant ideology. Barthes's demystification of mass culture and their manipulating processes were to uncover Myth Today implied in mass media so as to remind people from following myth and myth-effect blindly.

Denotation and Connotation

In semiotics, denotation, connotation, and myth all belonged to the concept of meaning. Meaning had several levels and the first level was denotation. Denotation was obvious to its readers and referred to literal meaning of a sign, which was similar to the definition given in a dictionary; whilst connotation indicated "the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign. These are typically related to the interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity and so on" (Chandler, 2007). Denotation was the surface meaning and even people without same cultural background could recognize it at the immediate sight, for example, when people from different countries see the sign of an apple, they must recognize the meaning it conveys though they do not share the same culture. Whereas connotation was implied in particular culture and could not be recognized easily by people from different places unless they shared the same culture. Connotation was not simply personal meanings and its framework was shaped in a particular culture so that certain connotations were taken for granted by all the members of this culture perhaps be incredible to people of other

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cultures. For instance, redness is regarded as happiness and lucky in China, but the same connotation cannot be found in Western culture.

Saussure focused on denotation at the expense of connotation whilst Barthes devoted himself to studying deep meaning in his cultural semiotics. The most remarkable thing that he did in seeking deep meaning was that he found connotation and the way of its generation in photograph because photograph was commonly regarded as the most objective and there was least deep meaning in it. What Barthes intended to do was to uncover the phenomenon that deep meaning was hidden in every corner of people's daily life including those seemingly most objective and innocent things. In *The Photographic Message* (1961) and *The Rhetoric of the Image* (1964), he analyzed the denotative meaning and connotative meaning explicitly and declared that connotation can be distinguished from denotation in photography. At the first glance, the photograph was denotative because of the identical nature of signifier and signified, which made the photograph seem so objective and natural as if there were no connotation. In fact, connotation in photography was active, clear, and implicit though invisible, which was not graspable "at the level of the message itself, but it can already be inferred from certain phenomenon which occur at the levels of the production and reception of the message" (Barthes, 1977, p.19). In short, denotation was what was photographed and connotation was how it was photographed and accepted. The process that connotative meaning was produced in photography depended on different levels of the production of the photograph such as trick effects, pose, and objects in which connotation was "produced by a modification of the reality itself, of, that is, the denoted message" (Fiske, 1982, p.91).

Connotation, rather than denotation, plays an important role in ads and Barthes stressed its delicate and powerful function in ads in *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964), here is the extract:



Figure 1. Panzani ad (Barthes, 1977, p. 33).

Here we have a Panzani ads: some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, and a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag, in yellows and greens on a red background. Let us try to "skim off" the different messages it contains.

The image immediately yields a first message, whose substance is linguistics. Panzani gives not only simply the name of the firm, but also, by its assonance, an additional signified, that of "Italianicity". The linguistic message is therefore twofold: denotational and connotational. Putting aside the linguistic message, we are left with the pure image. This image straightaway provides a series of discontinuous signs. First, the idea that what we have in the scene represented is a return from the market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined. Its signifier is the half-open bag which lets the provisions spill out over the table, "unpacked".

To read this first sign requires only a knowledge which is in some sort implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture where “shopping around for oneself” is opposed to the hasty stocking up (preserves, refrigerators) of a more “mechanica” civilization. A second sign is more or less equally evident; its signifier is the bringing together of the tomato, the pepper, and the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, and red) of the poster; its signified is Italy, or rather Italianicity. Continuing to explore the image, there is no difficulty in discovering at least two other signs: In the first, the serried collection of different objects transmits the idea of a total culinary service. On the one hand, as though Panzani furnished everything necessary for a carefully balanced dish and on the other hand, as though the concentrate on the tin was equivalent to the natural produce surrounding it; in the other sign, the composition of the image, evoking the memory of innumerable alimentary paintings, sends us to an aesthetic signified: the “nature morte” or, as it is better expressed in other languages, the “still life”; the knowledge on which this sign depends is heavily cultural (Barthes, 1977, pp.33-35).

Myth

Myth Today did not indicate the classical fables, but the dominant ideology of the current time and it was the deepening of connotation, because the manipulating ways of the dominant ideology of the current time were similar with the traditional myth, so Barthes addressed it as Myth Today. Hawkes (1977) illustrated Barthes's Myth Today as a complex system of ideas and beliefs constructed in society and meanwhile tried to maintain and prove the rationality of its existence (Hawkes, 1977, p.85). As to the nature of Myth Today, according to Barthes, myth was at once formal and historical, semiological, and ideological. As one part of semiotics, it was a formal science because semiotics was a science of forms, whilst it studied meaning or ideas-in-form when it was one part of historical science (Barthes, 1987). So mythology was a dialectical co-ordination of formalism and meaning-orientation. The articles of Mythologies focused on mass culture and found out that rich and varied forms of mass culture tried to reveal the single meaning-Burgensis ideology, which was permeated everywhere in the French society and attempted to Burgensize the proletariat ideology, and it did not solely manipulate the ideology tendency of the whole society, but functioned as the unique soul of all forms in mass culture, whilst the colorful forms were the various ways of expressing the meaning, i.e., advocating the Burgensis ideology.

Barthes not only pointed out that Burgensis ideology was the final signified in mass culture, but also exposed and criticized that the seemingly innocent forms of mass media were to impose the Burgensis ideology to all walks of people imperceptibly (Barthes, 1999, p. 3). He elaborated Myth Today in “*Myth Today*” with a notable example:



Figure 2. Saluting soldier (Barthes, 1987).

I am at the barber's, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier... In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the signs of the language... Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us... (Barthes, 1987)

Barthes claimed that the gist of myth did not come from the message it carried but from the way it passed. Here is its manipulating ways:

One must put the biography of the Negro in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified... The form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance... It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. The form of myth is not a symbol: the Negro who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, indisputable image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperialism... (Barthes, 1987)

Then he concluded the very nature of Myth Today:

Myth is... defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense... In spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense (The French Empire? It is just a fact: look at this good Negro who salutes like one of our own boys).

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... In the case of the soldier-Negro... what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: fabricated, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact... myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions... Things appear to mean something by themselves... (Barthes, 1987)

Barthes viewed myth as serving the ideological interest of bourgeoisie by making the dominant ideology such as beliefs, values, and attitudes and all the other current systems seem natural, common-sense, and necessary. For Barthes, myth was a speech of social reality and it functioned as a speaker that the existing system was normal and should be accepted by all the citizens without any doubt. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson outlined key features of the myth which was enveloped in Western culture—"a myth which allies itself with scientific truth, rationality, accuracy, fairness and impartiality and which is reflected in the discourse of science, law, government, journalism, morality, business, economics and scholarship" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp.188-189). In this way, myths penetrated in our mind without being noticed and "the power of such myths is that they 'go without saying' and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified" (Chandler, 2007).

Three Orders of Signification

Denotation, connotation, and myth could be classified as the different levels of signified. Denotation tended to indicate meaning of the first level of the signified, connotation second, and myth third. Roland Barthes adopted the notion of Louis Hjelmslev (1959, p. 69) that there were different orders of signification. The first order of signification called denotation in which a sign consisted of a signifier and a signified. Then the signifier and signified composed a new signifier and attached to it an additional signified which was the second-order of signification—connotation. If they were put in the whole signification system of the signifier and the signified, the relationship of the three orders of signification would become clear just as the left diagram revealed:

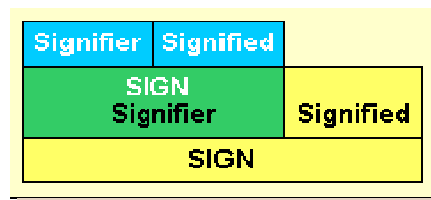


Figure 3. Three orders of signification (Barthes, 1987).

This tended to suggest that denotation led to a chain of connotations and the marriage of connotation and the ideology gave birth to a new sign of which the signified was myth, thus the third signification was produced. Here one point must be stressed that Barthes himself did not put forward the third order of signification definitely, but his claim that the first two orders of signification—denotation and connotation and that the connotation combined the current ideology would produce Myth Today indicated that there were three levels of signification. So his followers described Myth Today as the third order of signification, among whom Gaines (2001) designed a distinct graphic representation of his three orders of signification:

Hjelmslev's Semiosis Extended to Analysis of Myth

Denotative-First Order Signification

Correlation of the Signifier or Expression (E)

In Relation (R) to

The Signified or Content (C)

(ERC)

Connotative-Second Order Signification

The Signifier or Expression (E₂) is the sum of (E₁R₁C₁)

The Connotative level can be graphically represented as

(E₁R₁C₁R₂C₂) or (E₂R₂C₂)

By extending this formula:

Myth-Third Order Signification

Can be analyzed as: (E₃R₃C₃)

The Expression E₃ is derived from the Second Order of Signification:

(E₁R₁C₁R₂C₂) in Relation (R₃) to the signified Content (C₃) of Myth.

Or to more simply express the extended formula:

[(E₁R₁C₁R₂C₂)] (R₃) (C₃)

The Connotation of the Sign becomes the Signifier of the Myth (Gaines, 2001)

It was clear that the constitution of myth had to experience three stages, denotation, connotation, and myth and often the three levels of signifieds mixed and confused together, especially connotation and myth, so it was difficult to distinguish them except for the elaborate analysis. Denotation came from the direct-viewing, linguistic, or image, for instance, in the saluting Negro, the form was the image on the cover of the *Paris-Match*: A young Negro in a French uniform was saluting and the denotation was the fact that the Negro saluted the French national flag. But it was not the end. The form and the denotation combined to produce a new form, of which the meaning (connotation) was: Negro was also the people of France and they served faithfully under the French flag just like white people did. At the same time, the new form and its connotation was given birth, the denotation was exhausted and lost its existing point, though its form was still there, lifeless as a corpus. Then the new form and its meaning (connotation) joined up to generate again a new form of which the meaning was myth: French was a great nation and there was no ethnic discrimination in French society. This aimed at replying the detractors of an alleged colonialism that was prevalent at that time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both connotation and myth are ideological in culture semiotics; connotation is the rich and colorful exhibition of fashion, values, living attitudes, life style and so on, whilst myth is the total of these connotative meaning—middle class ideology. Both of them belong to the level of surface ideology, dominated by the deep ideology.

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