

Between the “Cultural” and the “Natural”: Mythologies / *Entre o “cultural” e o “Natural”: mitologias hoje*

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ABSTRACT

Mythologies, a book published by Roland Barthes in 1957, gathering chronicles that circulated in previous years in the *Les Lettres Nouvelles* review, is considered a dated work of analysis in respect to the factual themes of the texts, as it is typical of the chronicles, but is also a timeless work, considering the treatment given to these themes, which is attested by the reception of the text in the 1950s and by the continuous interlocution of numerous authors with the ideas that Barthes presents in this book. This article deals with the constitution and language of *Mythologies*, written in what would become the Barthes's style, trying to indicate some traces of the formation of this style. It also seeks to present some of the authors who dialogue with this book, bringing, at the end, the analysis of one of the chronicles to evidence the topicality of Barthes's ideas, if applied to contemporary facts.

KEYWORDS: Roland Barthes; *Mythologies*; Myth.

RESUMO

Mitologias, livro publicado por Roland Barthes em 1957, reunindo crônicas que circularam em anos anteriores na revista *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, é considerado um trabalho de análise datado, no que diz respeito aos temas factuais dos textos, como é próprio das crônicas, mas é também um trabalho atemporal, considerando-se o tratamento dado a esses temas, o que é atestado pela recepção do texto nos anos 1950 e pela contínua interlocução de inúmeros autores com as ideias que Barthes apresenta neste livro. Este artigo trata da constituição e da linguagem de *Mitologias*, escrito naquilo que se tornaria o estilo de Barthes, procurando indicar alguns traços da formação desse estilo. Busca-se, também apresentar alguns dos autores que dialogam com este livro, trazendo, ao final, a análise de uma das crônicas para evidenciar a atualidade das ideias de Barthes, se aplicadas aos fatos de hoje.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Roland Barthes; *Mitologias*; Mito.

Roland Barthes's books and articles have a common aspect: the diversity of the topics and objects to which he turns his critical eye: literature, history, semiology, fashion, specific works of very different writers, music, painting, photography... If his first two books still have a certain

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integrity, either by studying the scripture that brings out a style, marked by how the writer fits into the language in which he writes, in *Writing Degree Zero*; or by the innovative treatment of the biography he devotes to a historian, *Michelet*, it is his third book that opens a path that he will explore for over ten years and was then referred to as *Semiological Adventure* in an anthology. It is *Mythologies*, a 1957 book that brings together several of the characteristics of Barthes's coming works, such as a style that raises criticism to literary expression, the collection of texts already known to the public, the multiplicity of subjects and the theoretical cohesion founded on a foremost personal course.

He himself explains in the preface that the first part of the book comprises chronicles already published, especially in the left-wing magazine *Les Lettres nouvelles*, directed by Maurice Nadeau, in a session called "La petite mythologie du mois". [little mythology of the month]. In a chapter dedicated to the reception of this book, analysed in his doctoral dissertation, Andy Stafford (1995) shows how the texts were chosen by the author and how some texts were excluded and others were rearranged or even formed from chosen parts of one or another text left aside.

If he called each chronicle a "mythology", whose constitution obeys a particular functioning, having already functioned as an independent text, the collection of these chronicles could only have a plural title: *Mythologies*, which shows that, although it was a matter of giving sight to the dominant ideology in his country, it was not about creating a mythology of its own for France, as ancient cultures had. Even though marked by sets of fantastic beings, ancient mythologies maintained a certain unity by the established kinships and by the stories that intersected in the path of the myths, always in charge, according to Junito Brandão (1998, p. 35), of the "account of an occurred event in the primordial time, through the intervention of supernatural beings". In Barthes, on the contrary, there is no search for lost explanations in time. As Magali Nachtergaele (2015, p. 20) says, "The ongoing operation in *Mythologies*, and in the texts he [Barthes] writes during this period, is to make visible the mystifying strategies of the ruling class"¹. The time of Barthesian mythologies is the contemporaneity, in accordance to the probable origins he points to are all identified by him in the petty-bourgeois common sense, whose beginnings lie in a not so distant historical past: the definitive rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century.

¹ L'opération à l'oeuvre dans *Mythologies*, et dans les textes qu'il écrit à cette époque, est de rendre visibles les stratégies mystificatrices de la classe dominante.

The myths that make up these little mythologies do not therefore have the sublime aura of the heroes of the past. Rather, they are at the service of a certain levelling of consciousness, working to be trained to accept as “natural” all the elements that reaffirm the bourgeois ideological apparatus. In this sense, Einstein’s brain, Greta Garbo’s face, and the characterization of the Romans in Hollywood cinema are next to such trivial objects as steak with french fries, margarine, or laundry soap, for this disparate collection of references presents itself as an arsenal for the triumph of common sense. Leda Tenório da Motta, when dealing with this characteristic of the book, points out two important elements of its formation:

Thus throwing banal facts on the scale of antiquity conforms to the structuralist method. The *eternal return* of the same is also sustained in Lévi-Strauss, whose myths also talk to each other. [...] this is equally compatible with the distancing of Brecht, whose characters also assume epic heights, so that the wildcard actor can see them better within history. (MOTTA, 2011, p. 161. Our translation.)

The importance of Bertold Brecht and the distancing that underlies the work of the actor in his plays is dear to Barthes of this period, as he was an important contributor to the magazine *Théâtre populaire*, associated with the Théâtre National Populaire, directed by actor Jean Vilar. This is, by the way, one of the elements that show the Marxist imprint of Barthes’s writings of the 1950s, even if there is no trace of militancy in his production. As for the second element, although *Mythologies* is in accordance with the structuralist method, written at the same time that this current was beginning to settle in France, Lévi-Strauss’s main books dealing with myth had not yet been written, nor had Gilbert Durand’s book, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, which founded the myth-critique, been published. It is also the first time Barthes makes use of the Saussurean proposal of Semiology, which makes it the precursor, therefore, of the modern study of myth.

Serge Zenkine recalls that Lévi-Strauss, after reading *Mythologies*, had advised Barthes to homogenize the corpus of his analysis,

[...] that is, definitively, to keep in the analysis of metalanguage, no longer to engage in primary meanings of things, capable of engendering second senses by a dialectical movement; from this advice, some works were born, and we saw them in the classic semiology; certainly, more rigorous works, but less expensive to the heart of Barthes. Dialectical semiology was not adopted by the neo-positive ideology of structuralism, nor was it by Marxist orthodoxy (which, from Stalinist linguistics, condemns every attempt to elucidate the political engagement of language). Barthes’s thought turned out to be too rich

and complex to be fully accepted as operant. (ZENKINE, 1997, p. 123-124. Our translation.)²

With this particular relation to the movements, even though he later became a key figure of structuralism, Barthes establishes for himself a non-place, another mark in both his biography - with the impossibility of professional achievement within the French academic structure - as well as his bibliography, in which we do not find explicit engagements, even though ideas much closer to what we consider left-wing predominate. It is also this non-place that establishes its own style, in speech as in writing, as his first biographer Louis-Jean Calvet points out, when speaking of Barthes's teaching at the French Institute in Bucharest:

Mixing erudition and vulgarization, speaking in a cultured but accessible manner, [Barthes] unknowingly experiences a style he will adopt in mythologies. If he had taught at university, he would have had to submit to classical academic language, while at the institute, before a cultured but unskilled audience, he orally adjusted what his writing would be. (CALVET, 1993, p. 103, Our translation)³.

This way of writing, or style, if we prefer, reveals several easily identifiable features in his texts, such as the recurring use of capital letters to differentiate certain concepts, the use of etymological explanations, and a particular syntactic sequencing. Moreover, on the semantic level, as Éric Cobast observes, commenting on the same passage from Calvet: "Precisely this is translated by the irruption, in a trivial context, from a word taken from the specialized lexicon of linguistics, from literary studies or philosophy [...]"(2002, p. 32. Our translation)⁴. This style has earned him critics of every level and even a parody that he received very badly. Cobast then concludes his analysis of Barthes's stylistic procedure:

[...] Preciousness goes to some, irony to others. But what if this procedure were not analysed so lightly?

² [...] "c'est-à-dire, en définitive, de s'en tenir à l'analyse du métalangage, de ne plus s'occuper des significations primaires des choses, capables d'engendrer des sens seconds par un mouvement dialectique; de ce conseil, quelques ouvrages sont nés en lesquels on a vu des classiques de la sémiologie; des ouvrages, certes plus rigoureux, mais moins chers au coeur de Barthes. La sémiologie dialectique n'a pas été adoptée par l'idéologie néopositiviste du structuralisme, comme elle ne l'a pas été par l'orthodoxie marxiste (qui, depuis la linguistique stalinienne, condamne toute tentative d'élucider l'engagement politique du langage). La pensée de Barthes s'est révélée trop riche et complexe pour être accueillie dans sa totalité comme opérante.

³ Mêlant érudition à la vulgarisation, parlant de façon savante tout en restant accessible au grand public, il expérimente sans le savoir un style, celui qu'il utilisera plus tard dans les *Mythologies*, un style qui naît du lieu dans lequel il parle. Aurait-il enseigné à l'université qu'il aurait été obligé d'emprunter une autre forme, de se plier au moule du discours universitaire classique, alors que là, dans cet Institut et devant ce public, cultivé mais non spécialisé, il met au point dans l'oralité ce qui sera ensuite son mode d'écriture. (CALVET, 1990, p. 112-113)

⁴ Précisément cela se traduit par l'irruption, dans un contexte trivial, d'un mot prélevé du lexique spécialisé de la linguistique, des études littéraires ou de la philosophie [...].

It expresses, first and foremost, a freedom, a fantasy. He then adds that its user is a diverse man, a scholar without a chair, an observer without a fixed point of observation... He means, finally, that everything is the object of semiological curiosity, everything is a sign. (COBAST, 2002, p. 33. Our translation.)⁵

This personal language of Roland Barthes undergoes a *fading* (a word he uses more than once in his books) in the structuralist period, thus, during the 1960's, to return with an unbeatable vigor in the phase considered to be the last Barthes, but it is in *Mythologies* in which it catches the attention of the general public for the first time, to the point of making this one of the author's most read books.

If *Mythologies* is still Barthes's most widely read book today, it is not because of the objects he deals with - most of which are museum pieces - or, in all case, not only because of this, but because of the acuity of distancing, of the power of criticism, that we saw to what extent it could be active in denouncing the Algerian war. By bucking false evidence like the clue hunter, Barthes is not content to paint a picture of the life of the French in the 1950s, as is often said and greatly reduced, for example, the illustrated edition of the book, but he fully executes it the program of critical thinking. To naturalness, to common sense, to the oblivion of history, he opposes the intelligibility of signs. (SAMOYAULT, 2015, p. 316-317. Our translation.)⁶

This intelligibility of signs is based not only on the important role played by the Brechtian detachment in Barthes's work, but also on a thought from which he cannot dissociate himself in his future books, namely the anthropomorphism that delineates all human actions. In *Mythologies*, this anthropomorphism appears explicitly in the chronicle "Martians," in which the critique rests on Earth's projection of Mars in an attempt to describe what might be found on the Red Planet:

The whole myth tends toward a narrow anthropomorphism and, worse, a class anthropomorphism. Mars is not just Earth, it is petty-bourgeois Earth, it is the small domain of cultivated mentality (or expressed) by the illustrated press. As soon as it had just formed in the sky, Mars was thus aligned with

⁵ Préciosité vaine, pour les uns; ironie, pour les autres. Mais si le procédé ne devait pas être pris à la légère? Il exprime en effet, d'abord, une liberté, une fantaisie. Il ajoute ensuite que son utilisateur est un homme mêlé, un érudit sans chaire, un observateur sans point fixe d'observation... Il signifie enfin que tout est objet de curiosité sémiologique, tout est signe.

⁶ Si les *Mythologies* sont encore le livre de Barthes le plus lu aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas pour les objets don't il traite – dont la plupart relèvent du musée –, ou en tout cas pas seulement, mais pour l'acuité de la mise à distance, la puissance de la critique don't on a vu à quel point elle pouvait être active dans la dénonciation de la guerre d'Algérie. Traquant les fausses évidences comme le chasseur des traces, Barthes ne se contente pas de faire un tableau de la vie des Français dans les années 1950, comme on le dit si souvent et à quoi le réduit un peu trop par exemple l'édition illustrée du livre, mais il accomplit pleinement le programme d'une pensée critique. À la naturalité, au sens commun, à l'oubli de l'Histoire, il oppose l'intelligibilité des signes.

the strongest of appropriations, that of identity. (BARTHES, 1987, p. 34. Emphasis from the author).⁷

The thought of anthropomorphism linked to the intellectual activity of man had already been presented by Nietzsche in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, a text which will later be quoted in other writings of Barthes. There, the German philosopher concludes that:

One who searches for such truths seeks, not at the bottom, but the metamorphosis of the world in men, he fights for an understanding of the world as a human thing, and at best gains the feeling of assimilation. As the astrologer observed the stars as if they were at the service of men and related to their joys and feavers, so one such researcher observes the whole world as being connected to man, as the ever-deformed echo of an original sound, that of man, as the multiplied reproduction of a unique original image: that of man. His procedure consists in taking man as a measure of all things; however, he relies on the error of considering these things before him as pure objects. (Nietzsche 1997, pp. 20-21. Our translation.)⁸

As to Brechtian detachment, it is useful to reread the text in which Barthes analyses the photographs of the play *Mother Courage*, by photographer Roger Pic in 1957:

Now, anyone who has seen the Berliner Ensemble, or wants to look at Pic's photographs for a moment, knows perfectly well that to distance does not mean to represent less. Quite the contrary, to distance is to represent. Simply, in the distancing, the likelihood of the representation derives its origin from the objective meaning of the play, and not, as in "natural" dramaturgy, from an inner truth to the actor: that is, at the limit, the distancing is not a problem of the actor but the director. *Nüchten! Fasting!* Brecht told his actors, certainly wanting to purge them of their small personal emotions before making them perform. In other words, to distance is to cut the circuit between the actor and his own *pathos*, but it is also and essentially to re-establish a new circuit between role and argument; it is, for the actor, to mean the play, and no longer to himself in the play. (BARTHES, 2007, p. 40-41. Our translation)⁹

⁷ Tout mythe tend fatalement à un anthropomorphisme étroit, et, qui pis est, à ce que l'on pourrait appeler un anthropomorphisme de classe. Mars n'est pas seulement la Terre, c'est la Terre petite-bourgeoise, c'est le petit canton de mentalité, cultivé (ou exprimé) par la grande presse illustrée. A peine formée dans le ciel, Mars est ainsi alignée par la plus forte des appropriations, celle de l'identité. (BARTHES, 2002b, p. 704. Grifo do autor).

⁸ Celui qui recherche de telles vérités ne cherche au fond que la métamorphose du monde dans les hommes, il se bat pour une compréhension du monde en tant que chose humaine, et conquiert, dans le meilleur des cas, le sentiment d'une assimilation. De même que l'astrologue observait les étoiles comme étant au service des hommes et en rapport avec leurs joies et leurs peines, de même un tel chercheur observe le monde entier comme étant attaché à l'homme, comme l'écho chaque fois déformé d'un son originel, celui de l'homme, comme la reproduction multiplié d'une image originelle unique: celle de l'homme. Son procédé consiste à prendre l'homme comme mesure de toute choses; en quoi il s'appuie cependant sur l'erreur de croire qu'il tient ces choses devant lui comme de purs objets.

⁹ Or quiconque a vu le "Berliner Ensemble" ou veut bien regarder les photographies de Pic un seul instant, sait parfaitement que distancer ne veut dire nullement jouer moins. Bien au contraire, distancer, c'est jouer. Simplement, dans le distancement, la vraisemblance du jeu tire son origine du sens objectif de la pièce, et non comme dans la dramaturgie "naturelle", d'une vérité intérieure à l'acteur: c'est pourquoi, à la limite, le distancement n'est pas un problème d'acteur, mais de metteur en scène. *Nütchen! A jeun!* disait Brecht à ses acteurs, voulant sans doute les

In a footnote, Barthes explains that the objective meaning of the play, which Brecht calls *gestus*, is the political examination it brings. To distance oneself from *pathos* is a procedure that, even in his most personal texts, Barthes will try to accomplish, at the language level, either by redefining old notions and concepts by using capital letters, or by making tireless returns to the etymology of the words he chooses to represent his notions, or by the increasing use of a fragmentary writing, as resources that he himself developed to “empty himself”.

Distancing and anthropomorphism, as a technique or as a constituent thought, although only outlined in *Mythologies*, contributing to the intelligibility, especially of connoted signs, become myths, will be associated with the idea of zero degree for, in the second course given by Barthes in the Collège de France, support his conception of *neuter*. In *Mythologies*, the identification of these notions occurs mainly by the plastic character of the myths analysed, that is, by their adaptation to different discourses and their willingness to connotate, thus instrumentalizing a discourse that becomes as much to more arbitrary as to more natural it may seem.

The intelligibility of signs, even when the mythologies in them analysed have already become museum pieces, also makes this a well celebrated book. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its publication in 2007, Jérôme Garcin invited a group of French intellectuals and requested, from each of them, a chronicle about a myth of French contemporaneity in that decade. The book bears the title *Nouvelles Mythologies*, which would have been the name envisaged for a possible resumption of this mythological work by Barthes had he not refused to do so. The tribute book also contains disparate themes, some of which have been dated, although only eleven years ago, such as “the Polish firefighter”, “Zidane”, “the Sigolène tailor”, while others, trying to update the mythologies analyzed by Barthes., such as “the naked body of Emmanuelle Béart”, “the 4x4” or “the death of Abbot Pierre”. There are also those who launch themselves on unpublished objects: “the blog”, “the euro”, “Wi-Fi”, “the Nespresso capsule”. In the preface with which he opens his collection, Garcin highlights the now very popular character of Barthes’s *Mythologies*:

purger de leurs petites émotions personnelles avant de les faire jouer. Autrement dit, distancer, c’est couper le circuit entre l’acteur et son propre pathos, mais c’est aussi et essentiellement rétablir un nouveau circuit entre le rôle et l’argument; c’est, pour l’acteur, signifier la pièce, et non plus lui-même dans la pièce. (BARTHES, 2002a, p. 250)

But there is a paradox: Roland Barthes so well mystifies what he denounces that we can read his subversive encyclopaedia with a quiet nostalgia today; it became ambient literature, as it is said of music. The work was, first, politics, and ends, finally, to what looks like elapsed time, with a wonderful thrift store, an amazing cleaning of the attic, a childhood magazine, an all trade show [...] (GARCIN, 2007, p. 9. Our translation.)¹⁰

This view, however, is not fully justified. First, in an article published in *Esprit* magazine in 1971, Barthes had already re-evaluated: “If the alienation of society still forces us to demystify languages (and particularly that of myths), the path of this struggle is not, no longer, critical decipherment, it is the *evaluation*.” (BARTHES, 2004, p. 79. Author’s emphasis)¹¹. This analysis reveals, for its conditional character and for the recognition of “alienation” as a constituent of the society, a certain disbelief in the possibility of learning: If it is still necessary to decipher, this procedure was not well assimilated when it should have. Almost fifteen years after the publication of the book, Barthes noted then that the obvious need at that moment was that of evaluation. Now this only reaffirms the political character of the work, contrary to the idea expressed above by Garcin. Even the resumption of the book today still benefits from its political character, considering that in many aspects, contemporary societies have recovered even earlier discourses than those, which Barthes demystified. Secondly, the view of *Mythologies* as a myth in itself would not be justified by Barthes’s procedure, but by its reproduction in the *Nouvelles Mythologies*, which Garcin himself organizes.

Beyond this question, *Mythologies* has a considerable critical fortune, and it enables important work, among which, to cite just one example, I highlight Magali Nachtergaeel’s excellent analysis of today’s fine arts in her *Roland Barthes contemporain* (2015), in which each chapter brings contemporary artists in dialogue with the works of Barthes, and one chapter is devoted to *Mythologies*.

Written in the midst of ideas based on strong philosophical currents, in the 1950s, *Mythologies* brings the result of a dialogue of Barthes with his time, original dialogue in many aspects, but which was also imbued with *air du temps*. This is what Andy Stafford (2017) shows, who sees in Barthes a “left wing journalist”. According to Mathieu Messenger,

¹⁰ Mais il y a un paradoxe: Roland Barthes mythifie si bien ce qu’il dénonce qu’on peut lire aujourd’hui son encyclopédie subversive avec une tranquille nostalgie; elle est devenue une littérature d’ambiance, comme on le dit de la musique. L’oeuvre était d’abord politique, elle finit par ressembler, avec le temps, à un merveilleux bric-à-brac, un étonnant vide-greniers, un magasin d’enfance, une foire à tout [...].

¹¹ Si l’aliénation de la société oblige toujours à démystifier les langages (et notamment celui des mythes), la voie de ce combat n’est pas, n’est plus, le déchiffrement critique, c’est l’*évaluation*.

Barthes understood - before many - that ideology is not situated in the single sky of concepts, in the great slogans that then structure the French intellectual field (communism, capitalism, existentialism, Marxism), but that it lodges in far more insidiously on concrete things, on the surface of poor objects, and on seemingly humbler signs (a conversation, a gesture, a plastic display, a judged crime, a cooking recipe, etc.). (MESSAGER, 2019, p. 34. Our translation)¹²

Messenger therefore points precisely to what contributed the most to the acceptance of *Mythologies* by the French critic and to its permanence as an ever-repeated reading, the insight with which the author “detects” ideological manifestations, in his constant search to “denaturalize” the manifestations that are nothing but manifestations of a culture in its quest for domination. But it was not only the style and insight of Barthes’s sociological analysis that have been inspiring. Also the theoretical proposition of the second part of the book, “The Myth Today”, is an object of the attention of semiotics specialists. An example is that of Robert Marty, who seeks to demonstrate how, in his constitution of the myth based on the Saussurean sign, formed by meaning and signifier, having the myth as a second level, a second language, from a sign, that it as a whole, becomes significant for another meaning, is already an analogue construction to the Peircean triadic sign, which he seeks to demonstrate by proposing a reconfiguration of the Barthesian “metaphor” closer to the Peircean model.

Robert Marty seeks to explain this proximity, which he calls the “lost dimension of Roland Barthes,” as follows:

Formally, we plunge Barthes’s “nascent” doctrine into the foundations of Peirce’s semiotics and this operation reinforces them both. The first is somehow credited on the level of formalism and rigor, while the second is then introduced into the field of social criticism to which it seemed a priori alien, far from the taxonomic practices in which it was often wished to close it (MARTY, 2018, p. 22. Our translation.)¹³

The myth that strikes at this social critique is always assimilated as “natural” by those who practice it. According to Jonathan Culler, he always has an alibi who tries to

¹² Barthes a compris – avant beaucoup – que l’idéologie ne se situe pas dans le seul ciel des concepts, dans ces grans mots d’ordre qui structurent alors le champ intellectuel français (le communisme, le capitalisme, l’existentialisme, le marxisme), mais qu’elle se loge bien plus insidieusement dans les choses concrètes, à la surface des objets pauvres et dans les signes apparemment les plus humbles (une conversation, un geste, une exposition de plastique, un crime que l’on juge, une recette de cuisine, etc.).

¹³ Formellement, nous avons plongé la doctrine “naissante” de Barthes dans les fondements de la sémiotique de Peirce et cette opération les renforce l’une et l’autre. La première s’en trouve en quelque sorte crédibilisée au plan du formalisme et de la rigueur tandis que la seconde est introduite à cete occasion dans le champ de la critique sociale auquel elle paraissait a prior étrangère, loin des pratiques taxonomique dans lesquelles on a voulu trop souvent la cantonner.

deny the second-order meaning, “claiming they wear certain clothes for comfort or for durability, not for meaning.” (CULLER, 1983, p. 27), but he points out that even denied, the mythical meanings work because, according to Moriarty (1983, p. 26), “To appear as natural the myth must connect with certain habits of thought so basic to the culture of its presumed recipients that their validity is taken for granted”.

This social critique, according to Moriarty, points out in the myth an economic dimension, because “[...] by simplifying reality, it saves intellectual effort and, furthermore, simplifies reality for the most basic business relationship (at the antipodes of the complex relationships of modern capitalist production)” (MORIARTY, 1983, p. 28). Stafford also highlights the quality of this social critique, in other words:

The role of ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’ was to theorize a sociology of signs, found a new science, which ignored the historical moment of the myth’s transmission and consumption; its remit was to point out the double-bind of the demystifier only within this science of signs. The aim of the book was not to react to events as they happened, but to use them as examples for setting out a general strategy and theory for demystifying bourgeois myth and ideology [...].(STAFFORD, 1995, p. 102).

The most sceptical might ask what is the value of this social critique developed by Barthes in *Mythologies* if, over sixty years after the first publication of the book we still find ourselves with even more perverse schemes of domination today. Indeed, the prevailing discourses in society have the ability to transform what dares to confront them into an element to strengthen them, as Antoine Marquet explains, when speaking about the illustrated edition of the book under the organization of Jacqueline Guittard (BARTHES, 2010) which, as an art book, intended to adorn a coffee table, creates a scene and officialises *Mythologies* as myth (MARQUET, 2017):

But the reader who thinks the bourgeois opposition / popular class as outdated is asked to ask who has the legitimacy to qualify the concept as obsolete? Barthes is not saved from a recurring problem among intellectuals. Wishing to best follow people in whom they perceive the oppressions he engulfs, they provide him with a material to think (the texts have been pre-published in left-wing magazines) that is not easily assimilated. In order to render an uncomfortable thinker harmless, it is enough to give him honour in order to impose it upon him almost against his own will. To make him one of your own, in short, to cut off all aspirations to the agitated mass, to integrate

gently his work into the corpus of bourgeois, legitimate and harmless works. (MARQUET, 2017. Our translation.)¹⁴

Does this therefore mean that the work of the mythologist is useless? No. On the contrary, it must always impose itself more on this tireless dialogism, in which the interlocutors, on the one hand, oppressive ideas in sheepskin; on the other, sharp and deconstructing glances are always seen in the ups and downs, alternating historical moments of extreme oppression with moments of humanitarian relief.

The permanence of this dialectic, rather than its appropriation by the dominant discourse, makes *Mythologies* a book whose reading has no end, because, after all, it is one of those books that is self preserved by the reading proposal exemplified in it, much more than by the anecdotal contents that illustrate the approach practiced, which is not a practical method, the death of all ideas, but points the way for a personal reaction to the oppression of language.

How, if not for a personal approach, could we today confront the horde of myths that stand before each of us as seemingly insurmountable walls? How do we attack the virtual world, the *fake news*, the *escola sem partido*, the universal fraud in political systems? How do we react to strikes that today stop an entire country for weeks? How can we analyse new movements, such as the 2013 Brazilian demonstrations, the Arab Spring or the Jaillan gilletts, which do not recognize leaders but demand a new order of current systems? How do we analyse, above all, the ephemeral character that such manifestations assume, whether or not they succeed in their questions, invariably swallowed by a system always invigorated?

One of Barthes's mythologies can help understand this decade of movement rather than movement that we are experiencing today. These movements that, through the constant use of *fake news* and even official statements that are acutely grounded in false facts and assumptions, put us before a myth without precedent in history, especially because it finds no limits or punishment, even in the face of proof, which leads us to believe that today we are facing processes of *mystification* rather than *mythification*. The mythology that I analyse here, moving towards the conclusion of this text, is "The Strike User". Having compared the first publication,

¹⁴ Mais le lecteur qui pense l'opposition bourgeoisie/classe populaire dépassée est invité à se demander qui dispose de la légitimité pour qualifier le concept de caduc ? Barthes n'est pas sauvé d'un problème bien courant chez les intellectuels. Désireux d'accompagner au mieux un peuple dont ils perçoivent trop les oppressions qu'il avale, ils lui fournissent une matière à pensée (les textes furent pré-publiés dans des revues de gauche) qui n'est pas facilement assimilable. Pour rendre inoffensif un penseur dérangeant, il suffit de lui donner des honneurs, quitte à les lui imposer presque malgré lui. En faire l'un des siens, en somme, le couper de toute aspiration à la masse grouillante, intégrer gentiment son œuvre au corpus des œuvres bourgeoises, légitimes et inoffensives.

between 1954 and 1956, of some of the *Mythologies* chronicles in *Les Lettres nouvelles* magazine, Andy Stafford says that

In 'L'usager et la greve', the strike was described as 'la dernière greve des Transports parisiens', and a footnote gave the date of the Le Figaro article in which the letters of readers' complaints about the strike had first appeared; the book version, 'L'usager de la greve', mentioned only that the strike had been 'recente', and omitted the footnote reference to the Le Figaro edition which had originally provoked Barthes's study. (Stafford, 1995, p. 100. Our translation.)

The change from the title of "Petite Mythologie du mois", "L'usager *et* la grève", to "L'usager *de* la grève", in the version published in the book, suggests that the issue of the strike is no longer something with which the user has to relate, effect that is established with the use of the additive conjunction, but with something that turns to be (the strike), by the use of the genitive established by the preposition, plus a "public good" available to the user. The choice of Brazilian translators for the word "utente" (in Portuguese, the words "utente" and "usuário" are synonyms for "user") occurs in the 1987 edition, which we use here. A more recent edition of the book replaces "utente" with "usuário"¹⁵. From the title, one can think of a user who will use the strike as he or she uses the streets, the health service or public transport, which was in question in the strike mentioned by Barthes and which aroused the complaints of the readers of Figaro, treated ironically by the author. Barthes defines the user, "also known as street man" (Griffon of the author), as "a collective whole [who] has received the innocent name of population (BARTHES, 1987, p. 83. Griffon of the author)¹⁶.

As we said previously, Barthes's work as a chronicler is highlighted by Stafford, who also analyses, specifically on this chronicle, the co-text with which the author dialogued:

¹⁵ The Brazilian translation, in a 2013 edition, curiously numbered as the 7th edition, such as the 1987 edition, in addition to replacing that word, adds the ten chronicles that had been omitted "because they seemed too linked to a typically French political, social or cultural reality. perhaps difficult access for Brazilian readers" (BARTHES, 1987, p. 83. N. dos T.). Among the omitted chronicles was, strangely, one that became an emblem of the book itself, "The New Critroën." These modifications include the insertion of several other translators' notes, now organized at the end of the first part and no longer in the footer. In addition to the two translators responsible for the previous edition, the name of a third translator, Rejane Janowitz, was added in the new edition. Like the first Brazilian edition, *Mythologies* was translated into English by Annette Lavers, in 1972, with a selection of chronicles, now available online, which did not include "L'usager de la grève". The complete edition was published in 2012, translated by Annette Lavers and Richard Howard (BARTHES, R. *Mythologies*, The Complete Edition, in a New Translation. New York: Hill & Wang, 2012) and the chronicle we reviewed here was translated as "The man on the street on strike." In this article, however, all quotes from Barthes's books were translated directly from the French edition.

¹⁶ [...] appelé aussi *homme de la rue* [...] dont l'assemblage reçoit le nom innocent de *population* [...] (BARTHES, 2002b, p. 775).

[...] The same month that Barthes published “L’Usager et la Grève”, which mocked the reactions of *Figaro* readers to the Paris transport strike, [André] Calvès criticized, in its own rubric, the CGT and his attempts to block the general strike. Thus Calvès and Barthes contributed to the politicization of *Lettres nouvelles*, playing in a kind of duo that continued until the last *petite mythologie du mois* in April 1956 and the creation of a new section in the magazine, *Faits et commentaires du mois*; but it is difficult to know whether it is the Calvès or Barthes’s model the source of this new initiative. (STAFFORD, 2007. Our translation.)

Barthes’s denunciation on this chronicle is not so much about the myth of the strike itself, but rather about the reaction to it. More precisely, the petty-bourgeois reaction to the effects of the strike, manifested in the letters to *Figaro*. Barthes begins the chronicle with one finding:

There are still people for whom the strike is a *scandal*: that is, not only a mistake, a disorder, or a crime, but also a moral crime, an intolerable action that disturbs Nature itself. *Inadmissible, outrageous, outrageous*, say some readers of *Figaro*, commenting on a recent strike. (BARTHES, 1987, p. 82. Emphasis added).¹⁷

The use of the word “still” (*encore*) marks the author’s position at the very first line of the text. These readers could not be “users” of the strike because they are refuting it. The contrary positioning to these readers is confirmed throughout the first paragraph, when they are compared, by the language they use, to the French of the Restoration period, that is, people who omit opinions founded on positions established more than a hundred years from the moment he wrote. There is a harmful tradition here, considering the content of the text, because this tradition states that “fearing the naturalization of morality, nature is moralised, pretending to be confused about the political and the natural order” (BARTHES, 1987, p. 82. Our translation)¹⁸. For these readers, ‘to strike’ is to ‘mock all of us’, that is, more than to infringe civic legality is to infringe a ‘natural’ legality (BARTHES, 1987, p. 83. Our translation)¹⁹. At this point in the chronicle, we get to the denominator of all the chronicles on the book, namely the subtle sliding ideologically operated, so that what is cultural and committed to a particular elite is assimilated as natural. The denunciation of this mask is the main axis of the deciphering of myths, the aim of the book.

¹⁷ Il y a encore des hommes pour qui la grève est un *scandale*: c’est-à-dire non pas seulement une erreur, un désordre ou un délit, mais un crime moral, une action intolérable qui trouble à leurs yeux la Nature. *Inadmissible, scandaleuse, révoltante*, ont dit d’une grève récente certains lecteurs du *Figaro*. (BARTHES, 2002b, p. 774)

¹⁸ [...] de peur d’avoir à naturaliser la morale, on moralise la Nature, on feint de confondre l’ordre politique et l’ordre naturel [...](BARTHES, 2002b, p. 775).

¹⁹ [...] faire la grève, c’est “se moquer du monde” [...](BARTHES, 2002b, p. 775).

Barthes points carefully, as in the other chronicles, how this is done through language. In this case, there are at least three important points: 1) Ignoring the causes of the strike and the discussion of its effects is privileged, in what the author calls a “linear rationality”, lacking the “notion of complex functions”, either from a “solidarity between events” or from a totality; 2) Individualizing the user, becoming an imaginary character “thanks to whom makes it possible to break the contagious dispersion of effects”, to the detriment of a totality; 3) Opposing, as a result, the user to the striker, establishing an analogue pair to the conflicting pairs of bourgeois theatre: as

[...] the Old and the Young, the Mised Husband and the Lover, the Father and the Worldly, the readers of Figaro do so with the social being: to oppose the striker and the user is to constitute the world as a theatre, to extract of the total man a particular actor, and to confront these arbitrary actors in the lie of a symbolic who pretends to believe that the part is just a perfect reduction of the whole (BARTHES, 1987, p. 84. Our translation).²⁰

This operation has the effect of reducing the strike to a “solitary incident”, once the bourgeoisie, sharing the effects, goes on to ignore its cause under the pretext of not taking sides. Barthes concludes saying that

Protesting against the strike that bothers, the bourgeoisie reveals a cohesion of social functions, and manifesting it is precisely the goal of the strike: the paradox is that the petty-bourgeois man naturally invokes his isolation at the precise moment when the strike hits the curve under the evidence of its subordination (BARTHES, 1987, p. 85. Our translation)²¹.

With this conclusion, the text brings to an end the irony dispensed by the author against the petty-bourgeois thoughts. Besides being retrograde and anachronistic, these thoughts are now showed to be wrapped in a paradox that is the very metonymy on every bourgeois ideological process: avid to detain as much as possible what provides comfort, they cannot realise it depends exactly on the share of the population they despise. In other words, to use a popular expression, they play the monkey who grabs the fruit inside the bowl and, and not wanting to let go, it can never free its hand.

²⁰ [...] le Veillard et le Jeune Homme, le Cocu et l'Amant, le Prêtre et le Mondain, les lecteurs du *Figaro* le font, eux aussi, de l'être social: opposer le gréviste et l'usager, c'est constituer le monde en théâtre, tirer de l'homme total un acteur particulier, et confronter ces acteurs arbitraires dans le mensonge d'une symbolique qui feint de croire que la partie n'est qu'une réduction parfaite du tout. (BARTHES, 2002b, p. 776).

²¹ En protestant que cette grève la gêne, la bourgeoisie témoigne d'une cohésion des fonctions sociales, qu'il est dans la fin même de la grève de manifester: le paradoxe, c'est que l'homme petit-bourgeois invoque le *naturel* de son isolement au moment précis où la grève le courbe sous l'évidence de sa subordination. (BARTHES, 2002b, p. 777.)

Today, we are now far from the origin of this petty-bourgeois thought in over two hundred years and what we see all over the planet is exactly the reproduction of these same ideas. The campaign broadcast on radio and television in Brazil against decisions that “would put dangerous criminals on the street”, individualizes the victims, without reflecting on the causes. The left-wing demonstrations, which occur during the week, following the already old tradition of working-time strikes, continue to be seen as a highly harmful hindrance to society, while right-wing demonstrations, “committed to the country”, are made outside working hours. Even inserted in a technological context, which allows the use of unthinkable tools when launching *Mythologies*, we keep, at the base, the same polarization, today exacerbated by the plurality of voices shouting in a virtual square, which Barthes denounced in the 1950s.

At a point we are faced with a frightening regression, one might even wonder if Barthes was right to say that it is no longer necessary to decipher the myths, but to make an assessment. The return of medieval ideas and the explicit disrespect for the hard-built human rights frame seem to update *Mythologies*. This whole current situation is awaiting new “mythologies” or, as Barthes wanted, an “evaluation.” In any case, attentive eyes are needed, ready to denounce the tyrannical force of political ideas circulating in contemporaneity. And the only way to create a personal reaction method is invariably the Barthes’s attitude.

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If in *Mythologies*, this was not said in all words, in his inaugural *lecture* at the Collège de France, he will make it explicit, for, in the face of fascism of the language and - we may add, here - the fascism of myth, he proposes to cheat the language, a “healthy cheating” (BARTHES, 1980, p. 16), a deconstruction task which is done on inside, once there is none outside the language. It is this cheating that, he says, “lets you hear your tongue out of power.” This is the work of the mythologist, this was the work of Barthes, who realized that while there is language, there is oppression, but there is also a “permanent revolution of language,” which he calls *literature*.

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