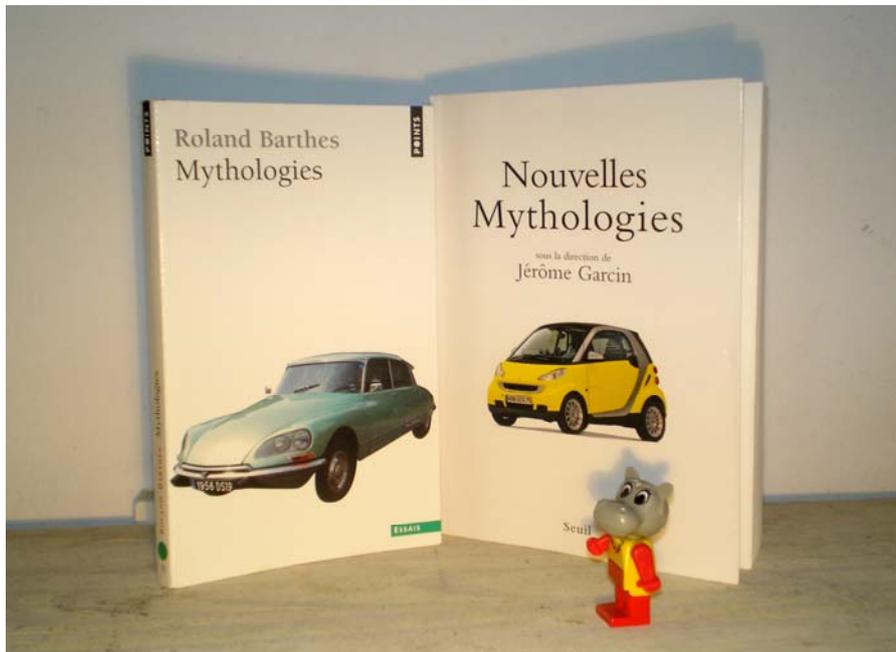


Nouvelles Mythologies and the Bicycle:
Barthes in the Age of Mythological Reproduction

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*Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Paris: Seuil Points, 2002 [1957]).
Nouvelles Mythologies, ed. Jérôme Garcin (Paris: Seuil, 2007).*



The shiny white cover that caught my eye in a provincial French bookshop shouldn't have startled me, really—I think it was coming to terms with the fact that Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* is half a century old. I was born three months after Barthes died, but his efforts to set out a semiotics of the everyday had always somehow seemed tantalisingly new. No doubt they were, when first published in 1957, and I suppose my shock at seeing a book graced by an upright yellow Smart instead of a swooping green Citroën is simply a sign of my own refusal to face the present.

Edited by writer and journalist Jérôme Garcin, the collection *Nouvelles Mythologies* is both homage to and an updating of Barthes's original work that analysed, piece by piece, the objects and commonplaces of French consumer society in the 1950s. Contributions average between two and three pages, mirroring the concise and incisive format of the original. It is no surprise to learn from Garcin's introduction that this new collection began as a series in the French weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*—a genesis that is in a sense foreseen in Barthes's 1957 preface, describing a series of short texts written over several years in response to current events. The most notable difference is this inclusion of pieces from some sixty different authors, representing a wide spectrum of French cultural production. This effectively highlights the influence of Barthes's once-revolutionary everyday mythologies, as well as their now thoroughly conventional status well beyond the pale of academia.

Many of these “new mythologies” are adaptations of the originals for a new century. Barthes's famous appraisal of the Citroën DS as “the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals” is reflected by two very different automotive mythologies. The Smart is described by Yves Simon as “the last shoebox of modernity”; and the how-to of the urban 4x4 is set out by David Le Breton: “in the absence of indigenous populations, cyclists and pedestrians will suffice.” Gilles Lipovetsky's account of the current middle-class obsession with “authentic” consumption updates Barthes's analysis of milk and wine, which he saw as defining symbols of French identity, for an age of new debates about ethical and regional capitalism. Barthes's faux-naïve commentary on what he termed “electoral photogenics” (“Some candidates for parliament choose to adorn their electoral brochures with a portrait”) functions as both a precedent and an analytical basis for Philippe Raynaud's reading of the tailored white jackets worn by unsuccessful presidential candidate Ségolène Royal.

Shifting mythologies also reflect changing times. For the unassailable status of steak and chips as France's national dish, and the "mythological treasure" of cream-based sauce recipes as printed in 1950s issues of *Elle* magazine, *Nouvelles Mythologies* substitutes GMOs (Fabrice Pliksin) and sushi (Jean-Paul Dubois). The plaster-mask-like cinematic face of Greta Garbo gives way, in Garcin's contribution, to the shock of a 2003 *Elle* cover featuring a naked, makeup-free, thirty-seven year old Emmanuelle Béart in the pose of an "ordinary holidaymaker." In a more poignant reflection on fifty-odd years of European integration, the science-fiction-like threat of communism ("The USSR is half-way between the Earth and Mars") is echoed in Nicolas Baverez's analysis of the more recent, EU-referendum-killing myth of the Polish plumber.

An enduring lesson of Barthesian semiology is that one symbol can best be understood in terms of another. This principle underlies the topicality of everyday mythologies, which can be seen in François Taillandier's description of "*le digicode*"—the near-universal numeric keypad guarding the entrance to Parisian apartment buildings—as "the blind little sudoku made of plastic and metal" that "has in effect placed a padlock on urban space."

Barthes himself has become, at least for today's French cultural media, something of a household name, and hence a mythology to be unravelled. Garcin's introduction notes a paradox between Barthes's Marxist roots and the way in which his mythologies of petit-bourgeois consumption have come to be appreciated: "Roland Barthes is such a good mythifier of what he denounces that we can now read his subversive encyclopaedia in nostalgic tranquility; it has become a literature of ambience, in much the same way as a piece of music." This sense of a nostalgic distance is reinforced by the inclusion of new mythologies representing highly divergent political standpoints.

Few, if any, other collected volumes are likely to contain contributions from both Philippe Val, editor of the satirical anarchist weekly *Charlie-Hebdo* (which has itself explored in some depth the “mythologies” of presidents Chirac and Sarkozy, and the furore surrounding the Danish Mohammed cartoons), and iconic conservative news anchor Patrick Poivre d’Arvor (himself mythologised as “PPDA,” host of endless televised debates between presidential candidates), France’s closest equivalent to Australia’s Ray Martin. The former’s piece on professional coaching draws on Barthes’s methodological framework to attack the development of twenty-first-century capitalism. The latter’s, on the January 2007 death of priest, World War Two resistance fighter and homeless campaigner L’Abbé Pierre, emphasises the personal humility of a figure Barthes had described in 1957 as the “coming-together of legend and modernity,” but who had objected to being included in surveys of admired personalities.

Many popular mythologies combine novelty with nostalgia, an idea that formed the basis of Barthes’s appraisal of the highly mediatised Tour de France bicycle race as a form of modern epic. The status of the Tour has been challenged over the last decade or so by drug scandals more suggestive of tragic hubris: for Frédéric Vitoux, the heroic mythology of the bicycle (*bicyclette*) is dead, replaced by the as-yet-unrealised ecological ideal of the humble urban bike (*vélo*). First published in March 2007, Vitoux’s piece ironically misses what has become the most significant new public object in France for some time, namely the system of twenty thousand high-tech self-service bicycles launched in central Paris over the ensuing summer. Named *Vélib’*, the system became a mythology in itself overnight, combining public management of individual transport with styling that is best described as a futuristic take on the sit-up-and-beg roadster with a front-mounted basket. The system is available at minimal cost to anyone who is able to leave a deposit using a credit card, and is indirectly financed by advertising revenue, thereby offering both a twenty-first century alternative to Paris’s

iconic but overcrowded metro system, and a revolutionary model for the provision and consumption of mass transport.

I can't help thinking that Barthes, who died in 1980 after being run over by a laundry truck, would have been intrigued. Given his ongoing influence over the study of everyday habits and objects, it's also tempting to wonder whether such a mythology could have appeared without him.

***Please note:** All translations from French to English were done by the author. Both texts are organised by theme in short chapters and neither presents major linguistic difficulties, so original quotations and page numbers have been omitted to improve readability.*