

# ‘UNE RÉCONCILIATION DU RÉEL ET DES HOMMES’: *MYTHOLOGIES* AND THE POLITICS OF THINGS

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For the duration of the fifty or so articles which make up the first part of *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes sustains nothing short of a bravura performance. His critique of French society and culture in the 1950s is defined by a seductive combination of irony, satire, political comment and moral judgement. His rhetorical manoeuvres range from sweeping denunciation (‘c’est une situation grave pour une société que de se mettre à développer gratuitement les *formes* de ses vertus’, he thunders in ‘Bichon chez les nègres’), to audacious and provocative ellipsis (‘je crois que l’automobile est aujourd’hui l’équivalent assez exact des grandes cathédrales gothiques’, he announces at the start of ‘La Nouvelle Citroën’ (*M*, 50)). But as he draws together his ideas on myth in the synthesizing essay which concludes the volume, Barthes cuts an increasingly weary and forlorn figure. By the final section of the essay, ‘Nécessité et limites de la mythologie’, his disillusionment seems complete.

The critical analysis of myth, which for Barthes means exposing the various means by which the dominant social order in France asserts itself as natural and immutable, leads him to a bleak and gloomy diagnosis. He depicts a society alienated to its very core, one in which even the apparently most innocent and uncomplicated aspects of peoples’ lives and relationships, ‘les innocences de la vie relationnelle la plus naïve’, have been infected by delusion and distortion (*M*, 244). What is required, he argues in the dying moments of the essay, is ‘une réconciliation du réel et des hommes’ (*M*, 247). His fellow citizens need to recognize their alienated condition even before they can rediscover a more authentic mode of being in and with the world, and reconstruct a more just social reality. Yet the chances of such a reconciliation taking place appear slim, not least because those who might help to bring it about — the mythologists whose job it is to cure the population of its delusion — in fact risk being ostracized from the very society they wish to treat. To engage in mythology is to take one’s leave from society: ‘et puis le mythologue s’exclut de tous les consommateurs de mythe, et ce n’est pas rien. Passe encore pour tel public particulier. Mais lorsque le mythe atteint la collectivité entière, si l’on veut libérer le mythe, c’est la communauté entière dont il faut s’éloigner’ (*M*, 245). A stark and terrible dilemma awaits us at

1. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957 ; Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 64, Barthes’s emphasis. Hereafter referred to in the text as *M*.

the end of the essay: the price of truth, both to oneself and the world, is expulsion from the commonwealth.

If reconciliation with the world is to be had, if we are to rediscover a truer or more authentic state of being with and in the world, then the suggestion in *Mythologies* is that we need to attend to one aspect in particular of our 'vie relationnelle'. For the most significant or problematic of the relationships he considers in the text are not necessarily those between subjects, between the individuals who constitute the society Barthes interrogates, but between those subjects and the objects which surround them. Or more precisely, if our inter-subjective or social relations are malfunctioning, then it would appear that the blame for this can be laid in large part on those objects and the role they play in our world.

There has been a tendency to remember *Mythologies* chiefly for the way in which Barthes brings semiological theory to bear on the analysis of ideology. As Michael Moriarty puts it, for example, 'the importance of *Mythologies* lies less in subject-matter than in the procedures by which it is analysed, judged, and not least transformed by and into writing'.<sup>2</sup> It is certainly true that Barthes's development of the Saussurian model of the linguistic sign, and his analysis of the way in which myth functions through the accumulation of a layer of connotative meaning, offers a powerful way of understanding how ideologies assert themselves most effectively by embedding themselves within the discursive and rhetorical structures of language. Indeed, Barthes himself is responsible for encouraging us to focus on the theoretical framework he develops around the objects and events he analyses, drawing our attention to it in the preface to both the first and the second editions of the book.

Yet I would argue that first and foremost, *Mythologies* remains a book about objects and our relationship with objects. It is a book about the importance of objects in mediating our relationships with other subjects, but also, given the way in which ordinary substances such as milk, wine and steak become infused with moral and political significance, with the public sphere more generally, the sphere of collective political engagement. Moreover, if I want to draw attention to the significance of things in *Mythologies*, it is because one of the questions posed by this special issue is that of the continued relevance of Barthes's text some fifty years after its initial publication. Why should we continue to pay attention to his analyses of the Citroën DS, contemporary advertisements for washing powder, wooden toys, or plastics? What makes them of more than simply historical interest? I would suggest that even after fifty years, the distinctiveness of *Mythologies* lies in its sheer sensitivity to things, and its awareness of the vital role played by objects in constituting the world in which we live.

2. See Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 19.

It is particularly interesting to reflect on Barthes's awareness of things at a time when they are more than ever on the critical agenda, and when various attempts have been made to clarify what, in 2001, Bill Brown finally dared to label 'thing theory'.<sup>3</sup> The recent concern with things has emerged in large part out of work in anthropology on material culture, and the investigation of what Arjun Appadurai has termed the 'social life of things'.<sup>4</sup> The aim of such work is to examine the ways in which objects circulate in society, and the values and meanings they accumulate. In doing so, it draws attention to the constitutive role played by objects in society, the fact that, as Brown puts it, 'things are part and parcel of society's institution'.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, neither are they understood to be passive or inert elements of society, in contrast to the active force of human subjects. Rather, 'thing theory' sets out to underline the effects they have and the work they do within society. Indeed, the central insight of recent thinking about things lies precisely in foregrounding the idea that objects do work and have effects — in short, that they are endowed with agency.

Understanding the agency of objects, or what Jane Bennett has termed 'thing power',<sup>6</sup> is central in particular to the work of Bruno Latour. According to Latour, we need to recognize that things are unavoidable constituents of the public sphere, the realm of political debate and decision-making. The problem up to now, he argues, is that we have singularly failed to do so. Hence the need to 'make things public', to borrow the title of an exhibition about our lives with things which he staged in 2005, the need to draw attention to their presence and the need to negotiate with them.<sup>7</sup> Consistently in his work, Latour has set out to deconstruct the opposition between (animate) subjects and (inanimate) objects, which maps on to the equally stubborn, and for Latour, equally problematic opposition between culture and nature. He sees both as symptomatic of the radical and problematic separation which emerged in the Enlightenment between the human and the non-human worlds, and which saw responsibility for each divided between politics on the one hand, and science on the other:

À la science revient la représentation des non-humains mais est interdite toute possibilité d'appel à la politique; à la politique revient la représentation des citoyens mais il lui est interdit d'avoir une relation quelconque avec les non-humains produits et mobilisés par la science et la technologie.<sup>8</sup>

3. See Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (2001), 1-22.
4. See *The Social Life Of Things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
5. See Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 12.
6. See Jane Bennett, 'The Force Of Things: Steps towards an Ecology of Matter', *Political Theory*, 32:3 (2004), 347-72 (p. 348).
7. See the exhibition catalogue *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005).
8. See Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), p. 44.

This division of responsibility gives rise to what Latour sees as a fundamental paradox of modernity. By insisting on the distinction between the human and the non-human, between culture and nature, modern thinking has denied the possibility and presence of hybrids, of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects, at the same time as the technologies we develop, and the consequences of the actions we carry out in the name of science, see their increased proliferation in the public sphere. Or, as Latour observes, ‘le trou de l’ozone est trop social et trop narré pour être vraiment naturel; la stratégie des firmes et des chefs d’État, trop pleine de réactions chimiques pour être réduite au pouvoir et à l’intérêt’.<sup>9</sup> At stake is the need to understand the complex way in which subjects and objects are intertwined, in which objects do things and make us do things, in which they inflect and shape human action in various ways.

Thinking about things might have surged to the forefront of the critical agenda only relatively recently, but it is certainly not in itself new.<sup>10</sup> The roots of ‘thing theory’ can be traced back to Marx’s commodity fetish via German and Soviet materialism, and in the French context, via the work of Lefebvre and Baudrillard on the everyday and consumption.<sup>11</sup> Yet despite its obvious sensitivity to the material world, Barthes’s work, and *Mythologies* in particular, has been a surprisingly infrequent reference point in current attempts to engage with things. My aim in the remainder of this article is to explore Barthes’s preoccupation with things, and read *Mythologies* as a contribution to our thinking about things. At the same time, I will draw out some of the limits and problems of his approach, which I want to elucidate with the help of Latour’s work. I will argue that *Mythologies* is about the drama of our encounter with things, and the need to take things seriously, but that the drama is one which — as he himself acknowledges — Barthes struggles fully to comprehend. I will suggest that if Barthes in some ways fails in his attempt to get to grips with things, it is because his understanding of the relationship between subject and object, humans and things, means that he cannot quite get the measure of thing power.

Barthes’s sensitivity to things can in many ways be seen as historically specific. His reaction to their presence, his attempts to engage with things and to understand what it is they do, are themselves an index of the way in which things seemed suddenly to erupt into the post-war world. As Bill Brown observes, ‘the post-war era looks like an era both overwhelmed by the proliferation of things and singularly attentive to them’.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s reflections on the post-war period, Kristin Ross underlines that what counted in particular in the French context was the speed with which things emerged on the scene:

9. See Latour, *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes*, p. 15.

10. Although beyond the scope of the current article, the reasons for the sudden preoccupation with things in recent years would be interesting to investigate.

11. On the genealogy of ‘thing theory’, see Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, and Bennett, ‘The Force Of Things’.

12. See Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, p. 14.

Contrasting the French experience to the slow, steady, 'rational' modernisation of American society that transpired throughout the twentieth century, Lefebvre evoked the almost cargo-cult-like, sudden descent of large appliances into war-torn French households and streets in the wake of the Marshall Plan. Before the war, it seemed, no one had a refrigerator; after the war, it seemed, everyone did.<sup>13</sup>

Technological advances in design and manufacturing, combined with economic recovery and expansion, led not only to an increased volume of objects in the world, but also to a dramatic increase in new sorts of things, as relatively new materials such as plastics began to filter further and further into the world of the everyday.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Barthes's reaction suggests that, for some people at least, things were becoming an increasingly problematic phenomenon, and that our relationship with them had suddenly become a cause for concern. Throughout *Mythologies*, Barthes strikes a note of unease or uncertainty — even if it is not quite Sartrean nausea — in the presence of so many objects.

We can identify two reasons for his disquiet, two narratives about our relationship with things, which are in fact never quite disentangled. In the first place, Barthes finds himself in conflict with the objects which surround him because, for the most part, they have become instrumentalized, or infected, by myth. Barthes's principal concern in *Mythologies* is to understand how things are made to carry meaning in the social world. It becomes obvious early on in his synthesizing essay that his thinking is predicated on a clear division between the human and object worlds: 'chaque objet du monde peut passer d'une existence fermée, muette, à un état oral, ouvert à l'appropriation de la société, car aucune loi, naturelle ou non, n'interdit de parler des choses' (*M*, 194). Any object in the world can be mobilized by human cultures and transformed into a signifying object. This process is not necessarily problematic in itself. Indeed, *Mythologies* affords us glimpses of a harmonious relationship between humans and objects. In 'Jouets', for example, Barthes talks enthusiastically about the benefits and pleasures of wooden toys, which underline our contiguity with the natural world and help to imbricate the child within it: 'c'est une substance familière et poétique, qui laisse l'enfant dans une continuité de contact avec l'arbre, la table, le plancher' (*M*, 60). They have a moral and ethical role to play by educating the child in its relationships with the world around it: 'le bois ne blesse, ni ne se détraque; il ne se casse pas, il s'use, peut durer longtemps, vivre avec l'enfant, modifier peu à peu les rapports de l'objet et de la main' (*M*, 60).

Nevertheless, society's gesture of appropriation and the passage from the object world into the human world seem for the most part, and almost inevitably,

13. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 4.

14. For the standard account of the period, see Jean-Pierre Rioux, *La France de la quatrième république*, 2 vols (Paris: Seuil, 1980-83).

to constitute a moment of corruption. In being made to do semiological work, objects are also coerced into performing ideological work. Things are instrumentalized by the dominant social order in ways which help to assert that order as natural and immutable rather than culturally and historically determined (and as such, subject to the forces of historical change). They become the principal vectors of the stories told by the dominant social order in order to sustain itself. Thus, Barthes underlines how, on the whole, French toys configure the child for the social roles it will be required to play in later life (*M*, 59). A particular problem lies in the fact that this process of appropriation and acculturation in fact involves a double movement, whereby the object is returned to us in a state which we are encouraged to see as natural, but which is in fact falsely natural, or alienated, because the ideological work it is being made to do is disavowed. One of the central dramas of *Mythologies* then becomes how things can be freed from the clutches of ideology, and how we can salvage a purer, more authentic relationship with them. The tragedy for the mythologist is that no remedy seems possible. Extracting the object from the discursive web in which it has been ensnared, and exposing the ideological work it has been made to do, simultaneously means destroying it. Like the cleansing power of the bleach which Barthes analyses at one point, the analytical power of the mythologist becomes 'une sorte de feu total, sauveur mais aveugle' (*M*, 38). His critical insight becomes a tragic burden, as he makes the real dissolve or, to use Barthes's term, makes it evaporate before him (*M*, 247n30).<sup>15</sup>

Barthes's account of acculturation, the process whereby things are absorbed, mobilized and made to signify, locates the origins of thing power clearly within the realm of human culture. It is society which gives objects energy and agency by taking them up and making them mean. However, when Barthes turns his attention to the nature of things themselves, and in particular to the *new* things which are beginning to proliferate around him, we can catch sight of another narrative about the agency of objects, albeit one which he does not quite manage to articulate.

In the first instance, we might be tempted to read Barthes's disquiet in the face of objects simply as conservative or technophobic. After all, one of the consequences of technological advance, he implies, is that it robs us of the profound and authentic relationship with objects we have known in the past, the sort of contiguity with the natural world exemplified by the wooden toy. In this respect, Barthes is particularly preoccupied by plastic, a substance he considers at various points. As Douglas Smith has demonstrated, plastic emerged in the 1950s

15. The mythology of the mythologist is arguably to be found in Barthes's sketch of the heroic and tragic figure nobly confronting his expulsion from society and his alienation from the world of things, however tainted, in the name of a higher truth.

as the most visible, emblematic and controversial of modern, synthetic materials.<sup>16</sup> In expressing concern over the disappearance of wooden toys at the expense of toys made out of plastic, and celebrating the warmth of natural material and value of craftsmanship over mass production, Barthes is aligning himself with a broader, contemporary critical perspective.<sup>17</sup> But what Barthes retains in particular is that plastic toys are alienating in their very substance. They seem to refuse or resist human contact : ‘La matière plastique’, he suggests, ‘éteint le plaisir, la douceur, l’humanité du toucher’ (*M*, 60).

Barthes pursues his thinking about plastic in a later article, ‘Le Plastique’ (*M*, 171-73). For Smith, Barthes’s response in this article is more ambiguous than the one he sets out in ‘Jouets’.<sup>18</sup> While taking plastic to task for the poverty of its material qualities when compared to natural substances, Barthes nevertheless suggests that as an entirely man-made substance, with the power to take on and reproduce an infinite variety of forms and functions, it can be seen as final proof of man’s ability to master and transcend nature (*M*, 171-72). However, I would disagree with Smith’s suggestion that Barthes shares in the ‘euphoria’ (*M*, 172) accompanying this triumph.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it seems to me that the ambivalence of Barthes’s reaction can be read as an indication of unease or disquiet in the face of plastic, unease which is not necessarily moral or ideological (plastic as a symptom of the inauthenticity of mass consumer society), but existential and ontological (plastic as interrogating and unsettling our being in the world). As a wholly man-made substance, it is one that we might expect to be entirely under man’s control. Yet from the start, we have the troubling impression that plastic seems able to take on a life of its own. It has the ability to proliferate in ways we cannot predict; we are never quite sure what form it may take on next:

C’est que le frégolisme du plastique est total: il peut former aussi bien des seaux que des bijoux. D’où un étonnement perpétuel, le songe de l’homme devant les proliférations de la matière, devant les liaisons qu’il surprend entre le singulier de l’originaire et le pluriel des effets. (*M*, 171)

Barthes begins his article by describing a machine which greets visitors to an exhibition celebrating the latest in domestic technology and design. Demonstrating the production process by transforming plastic granules into storage trays, the machine is watched over by a technician he describes as ‘mi-dieu, mi-robot’ (*M*, 171): god-like, perhaps, in that he represents a race which has created a material with the power to replicate the world itself; robot-like in that he

16. See Douglas Smith, “‘Le Temps du plastique’: The Critique of Synthetic Materials in 1950s France”, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 15:2 (2007), 135-51.

17. See Smith, “‘Le Temps du plastique’”, p. 136.

18. See Smith, “‘Le Temps du plastique’”, pp.139-41.

19. See Smith, “‘Le Temps du plastique’”, pp. 138, 141.

is a mere adjunct to the machine, with little to do other than to look on as it produces its bewildering array of objects. The article concludes by adumbrating a future in which plastic will invade and incorporate itself into our own bodies; in which the boundaries between human and the non-human will have become increasingly uncertain; in which the human, indeed, will be defined by, and depend on, the non-human, 'puisque, paraît-il, on commence à fabriquer des aortes en plastique' (*M*, 173).

Barthes's analyses of plastic and plastic things reveal some of the broader concerns he has about objects in the modern world, or more precisely, about the modern objects which emerge into that world. It is not simply that they are the products of a economic or political regime of which Barthes is already suspicious (broadly speaking, the bourgeois, capitalist order of the French Fourth Republic). There is something about the objects in and of themselves which makes them appear strange and mysterious. They possess magical or alchemical properties, exemplified for Barthes by the rapidity with which plastic granules are transformed into a recognizable, perfectly formed object (*M*, 171). They are objects which give nothing away about themselves — the essence of the modern objects we encounter in *Mythologies* lies in the lack of evidence of their creation, their swaggering eruption from nowhere.

Describing the new Citroën DS, for example, launched in 1955, Barthes observes that 'il y a facilement dans l'objet, à la fois une perfection et une absence d'origine, une clôture et une brillance, une transformation de la vie en matière, et pour tout dire un *silence* qui appartient à l'ordre du merveilleux' (*M*, 150-51, Barthes's emphasis). His attempt to characterize the new Citroën here is striking in the first instance for the effort required in order to do so, the range of epithets he tries out as he get to grips with it. The moment perhaps exemplifies his remark in the closing lines of the book that he finds it difficult not to speak *excessively* of the real (*M*, 247), that there is something about the world in its current configuration that requires articulation — but also, by implication, that there is something which lies fatally *beyond* articulation, something which he cannot quite manage to say however hard he tries. Moreover, it is particularly intriguing that he concludes his attempt to grasp the singularity of the DS precisely by drawing attention to the silence which seems to accompany it. Such silence may well, of course, be the reverent awe of the spectators gathered round the DS after its miraculous appearance (*M*, 152); but if one of the characteristics of the object for Barthes, as we saw earlier, is that it can be appropriated discursively, or transformed into an 'état oral', then these modern objects are troubling because they seem to shrug us off, to resist such gestures of appropriation. Indeed, at various points in *Mythologies*, we encounter the term *nappé*, designating a smooth sheen or coating: the epitome of modern culinary sophistication, as it appears in the pages of *Elle* magazine at least, is the sauce which envelopes the ingredients of the meal (*M*, 128-29). Furthermore, if these objects appear from nowhere, and



unbeknownst to us, they nevertheless often demand that we adapt ourselves to them. As Barthes remarks, 'faut s'y habituer' quickly becomes the watchword in relation to the DS (*M*, 152). Unlike the wooden toy, which existed in a reciprocal relationship with the body, modern objects — objects of science rather than craftsmanship — require our obedience. They seem to assert themselves with particular authority and force.

In signalling his unease in the face of so many objects, and the way in which they express resistance to human subjectivity, we can see Barthes responding to what Jane Bennett describes as the 'not-fully-humanised dimension of a thing as it manifests itself amidst other entities and forces'.<sup>20</sup> To put it another way, the problem which he must confront, and which he must try to understand, is that of thing power. Faced with the Olympian and mysterious presence of the DS, or the latest range of washing powders, I would suggest that Barthes begins to sense that thing power may be a property of the objects themselves; that they possess their own autonomy and agency; that some of the objects we create then begin to exist and operate beyond our control. Moreover, it would seem that the excessive quality of the object, that part of it which lies beyond the human, the discursive and the semiotic, is particularly visible in modern objects. If Barthes can be seen to be asking a broader question at this point — namely, how we are to get along with objects — it is one to which he does not necessarily have an answer.

The reason for this failure perhaps lies in Barthes's initial conception of the relationship between subject and object, between culture and nature, between the human world and the world of things. As we have seen, Barthes's thinking in *Mythologies* is predicated on a clear division between nature and culture, human and non-human. As such, he subscribes to an opposition which, as we have also seen, has structured Western scientific and political thinking since the Enlightenment period. Barthes's working assumption is that the things which are absorbed and mobilized by culture are always fully humanized, that they are drenched in meaning. Moreover, the moment of appropriation and absorption is also a moment of threat or danger, as the object risks being corrupted or infected by the dominant ideology, and re-presented to us as a lie, disavowing the meanings it has been made to carry. But, following Latour, we can see these assumptions, and in particular the dynamic which sees objects pass from the realm of nature into the realm of culture, as a key stumbling block in Barthes's attempt to explore objects and our relationship to them.

Lurking in *Mythologies*, however — whether it be in his encounter with the Citroën DS, or his uncertainty before the polymorphic possibilities of plastic, with its ability to replicate life itself in the form of replacement heart valves — is the idea that objects are always already part of the subjective realm, and vice versa; that objects are both instrumentalized and instrumentalizing. Yet one of the

20. See Bennett, 'The Force of Things', p. 366.

tensions underpinning his analysis is that this idea is one Barthes himself, arguably, cannot quite see clearly *enough*. Indeed, his essay concludes precisely on this note of failure, with an acknowledgement that he has not quite fathomed thinking about things: ‘c’est sans doute la mesure même de notre aliénation présente que nous n’arrivons pas à dépasser une saisie instable du réel’ (*M*, 247). *Mythologies* is an essay in the etymological sense of the term, failing fully to get to grips with things even as it attempts to do so. It is nevertheless in Barthes’s very awareness of things, of the need to think about them, and about what they do, that the historical and the contemporary pertinence of the book continues to be found.