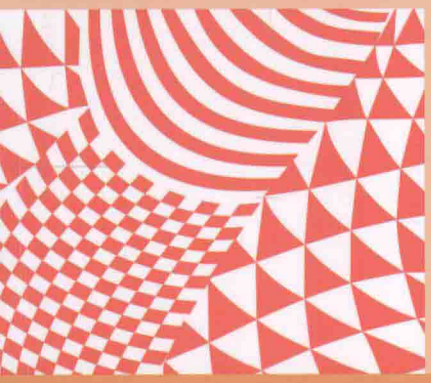


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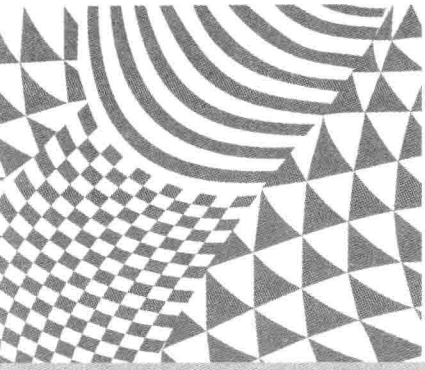
张平功 著

Chinese and Western Cultural and Literary Studies

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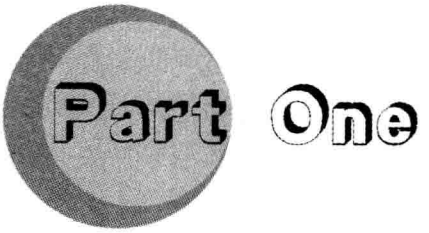
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Part One

Tracing the Signifier: Barthes and Althusser

Introduction

Drawing on the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's basic concepts (e. g. the signifier/signified and langue/parole distinctions, the idea of underlying codes and structures, and the arbitrary nature of the sign) (Hall, 1997:46), the French literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes developed his theory of mythology. In "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, the collection of demystifying essays (originally published in 1957), his theory of myth is demonstrated through illustration of concrete examples of French popular culture. According to Barthes, myth is a "second-order" signification based on the "first-order" of the language system—Saussure's linguistic model. What Barthes is interested in is cultural and ideological meanings of myth as well its applications in modern society, and how it is assumed and sustains significance. Barthes's purpose is to see through the process of mythical construction in order to reveal the significances which are manipulated and distorted by myth, and how manipulation and distortion usually take place in specific historical circumstances and concern particular

class interests, shifting "from semiology to ideology" (Barthes, 1968: 139). Essentially, Barthes's conception of ideology seems to be more consistent with structural Marxism, and with Althusser in particular, than with traditional Marxism, in that the myths in popular culture are viewed as serving the interests of a bourgeois class. The former argues that ideology is a force in societies in its own right, while retaining Marx's emphasis on economic determinism. As to Marx's base-superstructure model, Althusser interprets that the superstructure is not only determined by the base but by numerous secondary factors of a local and external kind. Thus, ideology has a "relative autonomy" from the material base. The relationship between the theoretical model of Barthes' mythology and the ideological thinking of Althusser's Marxism can be seen in the way that Althusser's ideology, as a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971:153) parallels Barthes's theory of mythical representation in that what people represent to themselves in ideology and representation is misleading. The relationship between themselves and the real world is far from factual, but "underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe … in all ideology: what is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (Althusser, 1971: 153-154).

This essay expands the discussion of their relationship by referring in detail to Barthes' model of representation and Marxist theory of ideology, with special attention to Althusser's work in this regard.

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Barthes's Theoretical Model of Mythology

Barthes's theory of mythology has its roots in the thinking of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857—1913) (Barry, 1995:41). In the linguistic argument of Saussure, the relation between the "signifier" (which is a sound image) and the "signified" (which is the concept to which it refers) is arbitrary, which is to say that words achieve their meaning from association in the mind, not from any natural or necessary reference to entities in the real world. These associations work through the principle of exclusion, which is to say any sign achieves meaning diacritically, or through a system of differentiation from other signs. Thus, language is not a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of signs, whose meaning is relational. Therefore, only a social group can produce signs, because only a specific social usage gives a sign any meaning. Barthes makes a step forward from this argument. According to him, myth is "second-order" association based on the "first-order" of the language system—Saussure's schema. It is understood that in order to engage in the process of signification the "second-order" system relies upon the "first-order" system, the language system. A sign in the "first-order" system, a word or a thing, becomes a signifier in the "second-order" system of myth. By using the symbolic or concrete language of other systems, myth comes into being and thus becomes a metalanguage because it can refer to other languages (Strinati, 1995:113). It may also be understood that through providing this additional signifying system, social meaning can be associated with signs in a similar way to that by which connotations are embodied in words. The loaded sign "becomes the signifier for the next sign in a chain of signification of ascending complexity and cultural specificity" (Turner,

1996: 18).

Myth as a process of representation has a great effect on people's life in modern times. As Hawkes explains, "nothing in the human world can be merely utilitarian: even the most ordinary buildings organize space in various ways, and in so doing they signify, issue some kind of message about the society's priorities, its presuppositions concerning human nature, politics, economics, over and above their overt concern with the provision of shelter, entertainment, medical care, or whatever." (1997: 134) More demonstrative examples can be found in the well expounded *Mythologies* by Barthes, such as, the difference between boxing and wrestling; the significance of eating steak and chips; the styling of the Citroen car; the cinema image of Greta Garbo's face; a magazine photograph of an Algerian soldier saluting the French flag, and so forth (1973). Barthes's theory of representation based on symbolic language, like other theories of structuralism, carries much weight in analysis of contemporary cultural and social identity, as Sarup suggests: Structuralists would want to stress the importance of language in the organizing construction of identity. It is through the acquisition of language that we become human and social beings: the words we speak situate us in our gender and our class. Through language, we come to "know" who we are. (Sarup, 1996)

Myth as "one particular type of signifying practice" or "one particular form of cognition" is a concept of ideology, for it is constituted by imagination and has become "part of the repertoire of every society, in some culturally organised way" like forms of "dreams, songs, fantasies, myth and stories" (Appadurai, 1996: 53).

One of the characteristics of bourgeois ideology is to deny the existence of the bourgeois class. The bourgeoisie seems a nameless class because myth functions as ideology to ensure that it is not named. Myth and ideology function together so that "individuals are reconciled to their given social

positions by falsely representing to them those positions and relationships between them as if they formed a part of some inherently significant, intrinsically coherent plan or process" (Bennett, 1979:116). To make it more obvious, the example of "democracy" is a case in point. People believe that democracy is the ideal political system in keeping with the nature and needs of people in society; history has been an evolution and revolution of political forms towards democracy; once states have all reached democracy, all they have to do is avoid reverting. There is no need for more progress in term of political improvement. People also assume that democracy is the political system best suited to the nature and aspirations of humans.

In the final analysis, Barthes believes that myth as ideology is functional in shaping people's outlook. Bourgeois ideology, through a long history of forming and transforming, is firmly cultivated in people's minds in capitalist society.

Althusser's Work on Ideology

Most modern Marxists, in a variety of Marxisms, have drawn upon, developed or expanded the school of thought jointly founded by Karl Marx (1818—1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820—1895). In *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels established the theory of economics called "Communism", in which they proclaim that the aim of Marxism is to create an ideal world, a world without classes, poverty, etc. Their philosophical viewpoint is materialism, treating the world in a concrete, scientific and logical way, as opposed to idealist philosophy. The latter has a belief in a spiritual or supernatural world. In Marxist theory, there are two well known propositions which are worth emphasizing: although numerous

philosophers have so far put forward theories of various kinds to interpret the world, what is important is to change the world; secondly, in Marx's words,

> "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their beings, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859).

The traditional Marxist theory of society and culture begins by understanding another crucial "but seemingly contradictory" (Williams, 1980: 31) proposition of a determining base and a determined superstructure. The base refers to the material means of production, distribution, and exchange and the superstructure is the "elevated" world of ideas, art, religion, law and so on. What is important for Marxism is that the superstructure is not independent, but is controlled or "determined" by the reality of the economic base. This theoretical model, known as economic determinism, is the kernel of traditional Marxism.

Nevertheless, traditional Marxism had attached little importance to the idea of culture, regarding it as part of the superstructure of society and therefore, a mere product of the economic base. However, as Saussure's concept of the social function of language suggests, this does not recognize the way in which language exercises a determining influence over solid social realities—including the foundation of capitalist society—the material base (Turner, 1996: 23). Therefore, in the history of Marxism, modern Marxists have made a great contribution, especially in reframing the place and function of culture. In the creative work done by the leading modern Marxists, Louis Althusser's (1918-1990) theory on ideology is central and draws most attention. For Althusser,

> "Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society." (Barry, 1995:163; quoting Goldstein, 1990)

It can be understood that ideology should be examined not only in language and representations but also in its material forms—the institutions and social practices through which peopleorganize and live their lives. This argument is different from traditional Marxist understanding of ideology in that the latter treats ideology as "false consciousness", "the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of man or a social group" (Althusser, 1997: 149), as contrasted with underlying reality of economic and class relations. Althusser's ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1977: 151-153). Althusser further emphasizes that ideology creates us as persons, that is, it "hails" us, calls us into being.

In his significant essay entitled"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1969), Althusser describes "Repressive State Apparatuses" such as the army, the courts, the police, which can be deployed to "force" the implementation of hegemony. "Ideological State Apparatuses" such as school, the church, the family, the media and political system assist in the reproduction of the dominant system by creating subjects who are ideologically conditioned to accept with "consent" the values of the system. Through this system of "natural" recognition, ideology is addressed to individuals and their identities are recognized.

Althusser's theory of structural Marxism is influenced by the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan. Althusser is interested in how subjects and their deepest selves are "interpellated" (originally the term of Freud), positioned (from

Lacan) and patterned by what lies outside them. For Althusser, psychoanalysis was very effective in suggesting that the human being has no essential "centre", except in the imaginary misrecognization of the "ego", i. e. in the ideological formation in which it "recognizes" itself. This "structure of misrecognition" of Althusser is important to an understanding of his theory of ideology (1971: 218-219). According to Butler,

> "The Althusserian use of Lacan centers on the function of the imaginary as the permanent possibility of misrecognition, the incommensurability between symbolic demand (the name that is interpellated) and the instability and unpredictability of its appropriation" (Rajchman, 1995: 239).

A Comparison between Barthes and Althusser

Althusser defines ideology as "a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations" (images, myths, ideas or concepts), which coincides with Barthes's semiotics, regarding contemporary mythology as ideology, "a realm which has purged itself of ambiguity and alternative possibility" (Eagleton, 1996: 117). In "Myth Today", Barthes gives a convincing analysis of the way in which the mythologies of advertising, fashion, popular culture and the mass media attempt to "transform what he calls the 'bourgeois norm' (Storey, 1997: 81) into a universal 'nature'". He perceives these cultural phenomena as mythologies as well as ideologies, because the purpose of these ideas is to naturalise modern bourgeois society, making it appear "normal" and "obvious". In the meantime, all the contradictions and differences in the society are covered up. By means of the structural approach, both Althusser and Barthes deal with

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