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Classical References in Contemporary Culture

Anchoring Cultural Criticism in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will look at referencing classical antiquity in the early days of cultural studies. Today, we know cultural studies as an established critical practice within the humanities which draws our attention to the production and reception of (mostly contemporary) culture in its broadest sense – culture as “a whole way of life”, as one of the founding fathers of cultural studies, Raymond Williams, put it in his seminal essay “Culture is Ordinary” from 1958¹. Williams challenges in this essay any sort of reductive and universalizing concept of culture by highlighting the social organisation of culture and stressing its plural and often conflicting nature. He also makes an appeal to take stock of the contemporary in cultural criticism rather than ceaselessly rehearsing established knowledge and reverting to classical traditions.

This typically postwar shift in cultural criticism is not only to be found in the United Kingdom, where cultural studies were first institutionalised, but also in France, more particularly in the case which I wish to discuss here: Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. This 1957 publication appeared one year before Williams's essay and collects a series of previously published columns². Their title, “*Petite mythologie du mois*” [“The little

¹ See Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary”, in Ben Highmore, ed., *The Everyday Life Reader*, London, Routledge, [1958] 2002, p. 92-100: “[A] culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organization which economic change clearly radically affects” (p. 95).

² The majority of these columns were published in *Les Lettres nouvelles* as “*Petite mythologie du mois*”, starting in 1955. Two mythologies were published in *Esprit* and *France-Observateur*.

monthly mythology”], hints at their cutting-edge take on things: each month the author touched on one topic that had attracted his attention because of its mythical quality and its random presence in everyday life, such as the stereotypes of the advertisement industry or the collective celebration of the *Tour de France*. Barthes collects and demystifies these topics from the perspective that they all partake in an ideology that naturalises historically-grown phenomena like the nation, colonialism or the bourgeois family. Barthes drew much of his inspiration from Lucien Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* from 1947³. However, it was Barthes’s study which became a reference work in most cultural studies readers, as it offers stimulating pieces on everyday culture and introduces a new theory of contemporary myth in the concluding essay. This theorization of present-day culture is still at the heart of cultural studies today⁴. Interestingly, Barthes’s analysis of contemporary culture frequently references the classical tradition. This is already clear from his use of the terms ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’, although they will not be at the heart of my argument here. Throughout the *Mythologies* there are over thirty references to Antiquity, one more extensive than the other. They bring me to the central question of my paper, which is the following: why does Barthes’s *Mythologies* appear to be in need of classical antiquity while discussing modern life? If Barthes criticizes his contemporaries for uncritically pursuing received ideas, what then is the critical function of a received classical tradition? Barthes does not comment on his use of the classical past, neither here nor elsewhere in his oeuvre, so in what follows I will make my own attempt to distinguish between several performative and discursive functions of his gesture to compare the present with the classical past. In so doing, I will make use of the concept of ‘anchoring’, which has been put on the research agenda by OIKOS, the National Research School of Classical Studies in the Netherlands, in order to gain more insight into processes of innovation. For what Barthes is doing in *Mythologies*, is exploring and formulating a new critical approach by means of a familiar – or at least familiarly sounding – terminological and cultural framework.

2. The Classical Reference: Contexts and Functions

³ Michael Kelly, “Demystification: A Dialogue between Barthes and Lefebvre”, in *Yale French Studies*, vol. 98, 2000, p. 79-97.

⁴ See Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Durham/London, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 1: “Cultural studies matters not because it is the only intellectual practice that can tell us something about what’s going on in the worlds in which we live, but because it is a different way of doing intellectual work, and as a result, it can say and do certain things, it can produce certain kinds of knowledge and understanding, which may not be so readily available through other practices. [...] By looking at how the contemporary world has been made to be what it is, it attempts to make visible ways in which it can become something else.” – See also Martin McQuillan, *Roland Barthes (Or the Profession of Cultural Studies)*, Basingstoke /New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

At first sight, the classical reference looks like an old-fashioned rhetorical device. If we stick to the French literary tradition, it may remind us of the genre of the essay *à la Montaigne* or Rousseau where such classical *topoi* abound as well. The first performative effect of the classical reference would then be that it distinguishes mythology from the everyday journalism on which Barthes has based his columns, which comprises articles from popular periodicals like *Paris-Match* and *L'Express*. The objective of these magazines is to treat their subject directly, so any classical reference would seem a redundant digression or even a stylistic lapse, dressing the discourse with the prestige of an archive which not every reader may have been familiar or comfortable with. It should be noted that Barthes's mythologies were originally written for *Les Lettres nouvelles* which published almost exclusively avant-garde literature⁵. Their initial audience was the leftist postwar intellectual who might have frowned upon the classical reference in the context of a materialist analysis of the present, but for whom the undertone was not as reactionary as we may think today. Certainly, familiarity with the classical reference implies access to classical education, which was not granted to everyone. In Barthes's case, this familiarity was even intimate, since he had been reading Classical Philology at the Sorbonne where he had also founded the famous *Groupe de théâtre antique*⁶. This successful theatre group, comprised of students and professionals, is important for my argument, as its aim was to stage classical plays for modern audiences who were not necessarily familiar with the classical repertoire. Thus, Barthes knew the challenge of negotiating between the ancient and the modern. And while working on his mythological project in the 1950s, Barthes kept reflecting on this challenge in his theatre reviews. He wrote for periodicals like *Théâtre populaire*⁷, where Jacques Copeau's model of popular theatre from before the war was reassessed in order to establish a new popular theater that would not only reach an elitist audience. For Barthes and some of his co-editors at *Théâtre populaire*, classical Greek tragedy was seen as a major benchmark in this process, as Greek tragedy was meant to be performed for the entire community (albeit male and free), not just for the elite.

This contemporary debate in a different field makes it likely that the classical references in *Mythologies* are not merely decorative. As said before, the objective of the mythologies is to unearth the ideological organization of everyday contemporary culture. In order to do so, Barthes uses and refines various modern critical approaches, such as *critique thématique*, historical materialism, psychoanalysis and

⁵ *Les Lettres nouvelles* was a monthly arts and culture journal, founded in 1953 by Maurice Nadeau, which ran until 1959.

⁶ The *Groupe de théâtre antique* was founded in 1935 at the Sorbonne by students of Classics, among whom Roland Barthes, to perform ancient plays.

⁷ *Théâtre populaire* was a review for theatre criticism, which appeared between 1953 and 1964.

semiotics. These bodies of knowledge are all brought forward in the theoretical essay at the end of the book which was written after the publication of the columns in which these approaches remain rather implicit. What does catch the eye, however, is the systematic reference to and comparison with antiquity in the mythologies themselves. Whereas sociology and semiotics are theoretical strategies for unpacking ideologies, the comparison with antiquity appears to be a tactic used to serve the critical discourse on mythology. It is not as distinctive as an institutionalized method with an elaborate conceptual apparatus, but it does bring forth a specific body of knowledge. My proposition is that referencing antiquity also functions as a critical and heuristic device in Barthes's discourse.

This becomes clearer when we have a look at Barthes's predecessors. In general, little research has been done on the phenomenon of references to antiquity with regard to modern non-literary works. An important exception is Neville Morley's *Antiquity and Modernity* (2009)⁸ which looks into foundational studies in modern economy and sociology from authors like Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Morley notices that their "accounts of modernity are littered with classical allusions, examples and references"⁹. Morley interprets this continuous referencing as a discursive technique which aims to compare the present with the past in order to reach a better understanding of the present. In Morley's interpretation, the historical is the defining feature of the comparison: the historical era of antiquity brings out the contrast with the current historical era, and vice versa. Morley is convinced that the prominent role that is given to the classical past, as opposed to other historical eras, follows from an overall familiarity with antiquity. But whereas Morley historicises the classical reference, my position here would be that in many cases the historical value of antiquity is subordinate to its classical value¹⁰.

This holds true, in any case, for the way in which Barthes treats the ancient archive in his *Mythologies*. The historicity of the reference is seldom at stake. There is not a single comparison or reference that adds a historical frame to his argument or asks for one. The only exception seems to be the mythology "*Les Romains au cinéma*" ["The Romans in films"] in which Barthes criticizes modern movie adaptations of (ancient) Roman history. Barthes, as he does so often, starts from the observation of a seemingly minor detail: the male film characters all wear their hair in a fringe. Barthes interprets this as an indication to the audience that they are watching real

⁸ See also Gael Grobéty, *Guerre de Troie, guerres des cultures et guerres du Golfe. Les usages de l'Iliade dans la culture écrite américaine contemporaine*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2014.

⁹ Neville Morley, *Antiquity and Modernity*, Malden/Oxford/Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 146

¹⁰ For a similar case in contemporary Belgian politics, see Maarten De Pourcq, "De Romeinen van Bart De Wever. Klassieke referenties in de hedendaagse politieke cultuur", in *Lampas*, vol. 48.4, 2015, p. 411-423.

Romans, even though this sign of “Romanness” (*Romanité*) is imaginary rather than historical¹¹. Barthes does not denounce this formal trick as such, yet he points out that there is no added value to this formalism since the haircut has no other function aside from *naturalising* itself: this *is* what a Roman typically looks like, or at least what the movie wants us to believe. In Barthes’s view, the detail of the fringe could have been functional in two major ways. The first is that the artificiality of the sign has an intellectual quality: it could have initiated a more general reflection on stereotyping others. Secondly, the fringe represents the difference between a historical and a contemporary haircut, and it could have made the audience sense the particularity of history – had it left room for other historical haircuts like the Ciceronian baldness, which it does not. So neither function can be applied to this form: the fringe may refer to a historical particular, but it has been essentialised for the wider audience to stimulate a quick consumption of Romanness. It is presentism and historicism in a superficial mix but is widely accepted by film audiences and critics alike.

In one of his theatre reviews Barthes makes a similar reproach to an adaptation of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, directed by Jean-Louis Barrault. Its mixture of ancient and African rituals is criticized by Barthes as a *pot-pourri* of sign systems¹². The signs have become dysfunctional, both intellectually and sensually, because Barrault did not choose between the ahistorical conceptual and the historical particular. These are the two main options which Barthes seems to consider to be valid receptions of Antiquity. Yet, as said before, the historical particular plays no significant role in his *Mythologies*. So if referencing classical antiquity brings in its

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, p. 26: “Dans le Jules César de Mankiewicz, tous les personnages ont une frange de cheveux sur le front. Les uns l’ont frisée, d’autres filiforme, d’autres huppée, d’autres huilée, tous l’ont bien peignée, et les chauves ne sont pas admis, bien que l’Histoire romaine en ait fourni un bon nombre. [...] Qu’est-ce donc qui est attaché à ces franges obstinées? Tout simplement l’affiche de la Romanité”. – « In Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar*, all the male characters wear bangs. Some (bangs, not characters) are curly, some straight, others tufted, still others pomaded, all are neatly combed, and bald men are not allowed, though Roman History has a good number to its credit. [...] What can it be which is attached to these persistent fringes? Quite simply, the announcement of Romanity. » (p. 19) Unless mentioned otherwise, all translations are taken from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. The Complete Edition, in a New Translation by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers, New York, Hill and Wang, 2012.

¹² Roland Barthes, “Comment représenter l’antique?” in *Écrits sur le théâtre*, textes réunis et présentés par Jean-Loup Rivièrre, Paris, Seuil, [1955] 2002, p. 147-155: “L’Orestie de Barrault témoigne une fois de plus de la même confusion. Style, desseins, arts, partis, esthétiques et raisons se mélangent ici à l’extrême, et en dépit d’un travail visiblement considérable et de certaines réussites partielles, nous n’arrivons pas à savoir pourquoi Barrault a monté L’Orestie: le spectacle n’est pas justifié” (p. 147-148). – « The *Oresteia* of Barrault once more exhibits the same confusion. Style, design, media, choices, aesthetics and reasons are mixed to the extreme, and in spite of the considerable amount of work that has been devoted to it and some partially successful results, we do not get to know why Barrault has staged the *Oresteia*: the performance is not justified. » (own translation)

own body of knowledge, as I have argued before, what would that body of knowledge be and how might it work?

3. Functions of the Classical Reference: Irony, Anchoring and Ethics

In what follows I will focus on two major points: the first is the ironic function of the classical reference and the second is its cognitive function. The first may come as a surprise, since irony tends to disrespect the classical. An example of this can be found in the mythology on the actors' portraits taken by the *Studio Harcourt*. Barthes tries to capture the picture's intent which is to idealize the actor rather than portray him in his working conditions¹³. This *dehistoricisation* of the actor is stressed by a Platonic subtext and references to ancient mythology. A great number of the passing references to antiquity in *Mythologies* serve to reinforce the mythical aura of the object at stake. It is by adding another myth to the contemporary myth that the mythical is ironically dramatised. The myth, as it were, points to itself. The critical function of irony always has its risks, for in its subversion it also tends to reassert the problem rather than presenting an alternative. The use of classical myth here suggests even a natural continuity of the mythical mindset. It raises the question of whether referencing the classical past would not be partaking in its modern mythification. One could wonder: is its ironic function critical enough?

A disclaimer in Barthes's preface to the *Mythologies* suggests a certain awareness of the fact that his sarcastic style also implicates him in the mythical discourse of his own time¹⁴. The ironic way in which Barthes embroiders his mythologies with classical references shows that it is difficult to escape from the logic of this language which turns the historical into the universal. For this is what happens to antiquity if its historical particularity is neglected in favour of its classical exemplarity. This issue becomes even more vexing when it becomes apparent that in most cases Barthes does

¹³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, *op. cit.*, p. 22: "[I]l faut que nous soyons saisis de trouble en découvrant suspendue aux escaliers du théâtre, comme un sphinx à l'entrée du sanctuaire, l'image olympienne d'un acteur qui a dépouillé la peau du monstre agité, trop humain, et retrouve enfin son essence intemporelle. L'acteur prend ici sa revanche: obligé par sa fonction sacerdotale à jouer quelquefois la vieillesse et la laideur, en tout cas la dépossession de lui-même, on lui fait retrouver un visage idéal, détaché (comme chez le teinturier) des impropriétés de la profession." – « [W]e must be stricken by confusion to discover, posted in the theater lobby like a sphinx at the sanctuary entrance, the Olympian image of an actor who has shed the skin of the frantic, all-too-human monster and at last recovered his timeless essence. Here the actor takes his revenge: obliged by his sacerdotal function to mime on occasion old age, ugliness, in any case the dispossession of himself; he now recovers an ideal visage detached from the improprieties of the profession. » (p. 15)

¹⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, *op. cit.*, p. 8: "La "démystification", pour employer encore un mot qui commence à s'user, n'est pas une opération olympienne: [...] je réclame de vivre pleinement la contradiction de mon temps, qui peut faire d'un sarcasme la condition de la vérité." – « « Demystification, » to keep using a word that's showing signs of wear, is not an Olympian operation: [...] my claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which can make sarcasm the condition of truth. » (p. xii)

not ironise the classical. For example, he willfully uses concepts from classical rhetoric to identify and interpret mythological mechanisms. Also, the classical genres of epic and tragedy enable him to articulate what exactly is at stake in modern sporting events. In most of these cases, Barthes's slight depreciation of modern myth is even replaced by slight appreciation. For the analogy with ancient literature reveals certain intelligible structures and aesthetic qualities by which the modern myth does not obfuscate but actually makes us see fundamental aspects of the interaction between human beings, as between humans and nature. This is what I would call the *cognitive* function of the classical reference. Yet the content of this classical reference has a dubious status, as it seldom possesses a singular historical referent. I will try to clarify this with an example.

In one of his most extensive mythologies, "*Le Tour de France comme épopée*" ("The Tour de France as epic"), Barthes draws a detailed comparison between the Tour de France and epic, more particularly with the heroism of the *Iliad* and the personified geography of the *Odyssey*. But since he also ranges features of the modern novel or aspects of Christianity under the category of the ancient epic, this is definitely not a historicist comparison with antiquity. And perhaps it should not be called a comparison either, because its function is much more pervasive: it is a heuristic device that supports the articulation of the mythology. In other words, Barthes *anchors* his analysis of modern culture in a classical tradition. The idea of "anchoring" here stands for a cognitive practice in which the modern is embedded in or attached to what is older, traditional and familiar. The term has been introduced by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, two psychologists who have looked into processes of decision-making and problem-solving¹⁵. In their experiments, they observed that people tend to rely on an initial value or an initial piece of information when they have to judge a new situation. For example, people tend to estimate the result of "(1x2x3x4x5x6x7x8)" as higher than "(8x7x6x5x4x3x2x1)"¹⁶, exactly the same multiplication but in descending order. The striking ascending structure of the multiplication is the initial information which *anchors* and here also misguides the estimation. This is one example among many that shows how the mind tends to deploy mental shortcuts when facing new and complex situations.

In a similar way, the classical world can be seen as an anchoring device or as a storehouse of different anchoring devices. It is used within an intellectual discourse

¹⁵ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases", in *Science*, vol. 185, 1974, p. 1124-1131. For the use of this concept in the framework of the OIKOS research agenda 'Anchoring Innovation in Antiquity', see Ineke Sluiter, "Anchoring Innovation", *Proceedings of the Vilnius Conference Horizons for the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, Vilnius, 23-25 September 2013, p. 71-ff.

¹⁶ *Id.*, p. 1131.

that operates under uncertainty, precisely because it tries to deal with the contemporary. It reminds me of an interview with another French theorist, Tzvetan Todorov, right after 9/11 in which he was asked why President George W. Bush Jr. was so much in need of an external enemy as a foundation for his politics. Todorov began his response by saying: “Ever since the ancient Greeks...¹⁷”. This is typically the sort of mental shortcut which brings in the ancient Greeks as the imaginary beginning of Western culture to anchor the impromptu explanation of a contemporary problem. My point here is not necessarily that the classical reference is misleading to thought processes, but that its persistence is related to the fact that it is valued as a symbolic beginning. It is taken as the official beginning of an unfinished cultural process and as such it has become an important stepping stone for cultural criticism even until today. This reflexive reliance on the classical tradition can be seen as a conservative vein that runs through the work of many French theorists. It also shows the hybrid nature of the classical reference: on the one hand, the classical past stands for the beginning of a history; on the other, it has permanent relevance. Indeed, it brings possibly relevant information to the task of analyzing the present. This occurs because the classical past is believed to be essentially related to our culture and not only to a singular historical period. This is, in a way, a *dehistoricising* gesture, but it allows an essentialized form of history to cut across the naturalisms of modern myth.

Whether or not we assess Barthes’s use of the classical as reactionary depends on our estimation of its use in the context of Barthes’s work. Barthes has only a minor interest in the social organisation of contemporary culture and in that sense his approach differs from that of cultural studies practitioners like Raymond Williams. Another point of dissent with the latter is Barthes’s belief that everyday popular culture is deeply permeated by the cultural power of the bourgeoisie. It is against this perceived power and its unifying effect that Barthes composes his mythologies. It is also against this historical background that the classical archive receives its critical force. This can be seen in Barthes’s obsession with the contemporary populist Pierre Poujade. Barthes stages Poujade in the *Mythologies* as an Aristophanes mocking Socrates – intellectuals like Barthes who combine the clouds of thought with the streets of contemporary questions. Barthes takes Poujade’s incessant appeal to common sense as emblematic for the closed worldview of the petty bourgeoisie: it is only the here and now that counts. Hence, the classical reference also receives an ethical function. It brings in a standard and another language which falls outside of the merely contemporary. In so doing, the classical reference makes an appeal to resist the mental shortcut towards the contemporary. This appeal can perhaps also be

¹⁷ This interview took place on 22 April 2007 during a literary festival in Brussels, organized by Passa Porta.

made to the field of cultural studies, since it is a point generally missed in their reception of the *Mythologies*.

4. Conclusion

When exploring the present, Barthes not only implements modern theories but also the established discursive practice of referencing the classical. He does so not only reflexively, as the theory of anchoring may suggest, but also ironically and willfully. However, the different discursive functions of this practice are not necessarily in keeping with each other, since the negative, ironic use of the classical tradition conflicts with its positive cognitive and ethical uses. This, in turn, demonstrates modernity's struggle to conceptualize the present and the past concomitantly. For we lack the terminology to describe a relationship to the past which avoids a bifurcation between historicism and presentism. It looks, however, as if Barthes's discourse in the *Mythologies* searches out that third position by anchoring its new critical language in a classical one.