

## Of Wine and Steak: Reading Gustatory Signs/Signifiers in Roland Barthes' Essays

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### Abstract

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* perhaps has the singular distinction of having baffled scholars of semiotics/cultural studies or anyone who has taken an interest in the history of French colonialism and its nefarious influence on the 'empire' (Algeria, in particular). This article despite its limitations, intends to demystify/unravel some ostensibly innocuous 'culinary predilections' in vogue (during the 1950s-1960s and in some cases even germane to the 21<sup>st</sup> century) in France. In addition to his magnum opus, I will focus on his other significant text on the same topic (and gastro nationalism), *Toward a Psychosociology of contemporary food consumption*.

**Keywords:** Roland Barthes, Sartre, Gustatory signs/signifiers, Algeria, Imperialism, FLN.

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Roland Barthes was the quintessential semiotician. Now, this statement might seem trite for mavens in semiotics/cultural studies. But, I do have my reasons. Barthes himself had one. Remember Barthes' famous reply when he was asked about the school to which he owed allegiance? As you know, Barthes thrived as a semiotician and a literary critic in the great French Amazon (I had in mind the myriad disciplines that had an impact on the French society like Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, Marxism etc.) teeming with apex intellectual predators like Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and many other seminal figures from myriad disciplines. He was ensconced on an equal pedestal, a figure much revered/reviled among the French academia despite being an outsider (Barthes was gay in a heteronormative France; a Protestant when Catholicism was at its peak). Barthes preferred a revolving chair to an ordinary chair (academic). He was like one of those signifiers which can't be pinned down. Barthes was one of the earliest pioneers of structuralism until he reneged on the movement and decided to embrace poststructuralism and become a practitioner of its tenets/ideas of structure and signification which have come to underpin cultural studies and critical theory today. For many, Barthes is both a structuralist and a poststructuralist. Personally, [because I have come under the influence of Totem and Taboo (Freud, Sigmund (1913): *Totem and Taboo*, Boston: Imago)] I have a penchant for this ambivalence towards Barthes and his prolific oeuvre. Having said

that, I would like to bring your attention to Barthes' notion of mythology, which catapulted him into the academic spotlight or was it something similar to an apotheosis through which, he became one of the demigods in critical theory and cultural studies? If Sontag were alive, she too would have agreed. As an undergraduate I could sense the influence of Barthes in Sontag's essays, especially the one on 'Camp' (Sontag, Susan (1966): *Against Interpretation*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and the eponymous 'Against Interpretation' essay. Barthes' predilection for myths gravitated him towards...well...everything. He saw myths working everywhere from the world of wrestling [which incidentally was his first and most famous essay in the *Mythologies* (Barthes, Roland (1957): *Mythologies*, France: Les Lettres Nouvelles) series] to the juvenescent world where toys play a major role in conditioning one's life/gender.

As a devoted gourmand, I couldn't help but develop a fascination for Barthes' gustatory signs and significations. Barthes wrote an essay on the mythology of red wine and milk and other modern myths which he gleaned from the French bourgeois culture including steak and chips, the foam in foie gras and expensive champagnes. The most explicitly political aspect of Roland Barthes' work is his mythology and study of myths, as I mentioned earlier. Barthes connects the French predilection for red wine to the Imperialism of the 1960s, especially the French exploitation and

colonization of Algeria. Algeria became independent only in 1962 after a series of protests spearheaded by the likes of illustrious figures like Sartre and Fanon started disrupting/questioning the status quo of the French society, which until then had turned a blind eye to the problems of the colonized. Barthes had an issue with the French penchant for red wine exactly because it reminded him of the atrocities perpetrated in the name of the ‘mission civilisatrice’ or the civilizing mission. The French were behind the burgeoning vineyards in Algeria. It came with a cost as well. The staple food of the Algerian Muslims was and still is wheat. But, the French didn’t care anyway and continued with its invidious policies until the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale) truncated its reign for good. Whenever he saw people indulging in expensive red wine, he suffered from compunctions of conscience and can we blame him? After all, he was deeply influenced by Sartre’s philosophy and we are familiar with Sartre’s endless recrimination of his country. Sartre, himself preferred to use pronouns like ‘we’, ‘us’ etc. and the French were always at the receiving end of his vitriol. One only needs to read his famous preface to Fanon’s ‘The Wretched of the Earth’ (Fanon, Frantz (1961): *The Wretched of the Earth*, France: François Maspero), wherein he refers to “killing two birds with one stone”. Sartre reviled hypocrisy as much as he hated bigoted notions of racial superiority. Something akin to the Algerian exploitation happened in India around the same time. The British Raj replaced the staple crops with indigo plantations across the subcontinent, putting the lives of millions at stake. Like the Algerians, the Indians too found this invidious practice of colonialism unacceptable.

The main purpose of his work in *Mythologies* (Barthes, Roland (1957): *Mythologies*, France: Les Lettres Nouvelles) is to dissect the functioning of certain myths. Myth, according to Barthes is a semiotic system. It takes an already constituted sign and turns it into a signifier. According to Barthes, myths had the unique power of making particular signs appear natural, eternal, absolute and bereft of history. The function of myth is to arrest or freeze language with the nefarious intent of transforming history into nature. As I mentioned earlier, this aspect of myths makes it possible to gloss over its invidious practices and policies. Take red wine or the steak for example, which are the gustatory signs of ‘Frenchness’. In his famous piece titled ‘Wine and Milk’, (Barthes, Roland (1957): *Mythologies*, France: Les Lettres Nouvelles) Barthes catalogues the reasons for the French fixation on wine. The wine, according to Barthes is also a symbol of opulence. What about the foam in expensive wines and champagnes or on the foie gras? Barthes has an answer for all these queries. Red wine is regarded as a ‘resilient totem’ and ‘alchemical’ substance with a philosophical power. He brings our attention to the alchemical properties of wine in particular because it uplifts one’s mood and has the capacity to change consciousness and behaviour (and

also reverse it). This is what gave birth to the national mythology of wine to which every French person is expected to subscribe—if you don’t subscribe to this belief in the alchemical properties of red wine you risk being labelled a maverick or an apostate. I mentioned earlier how imperialism and red wine were ineluctably intertwined. To make matters worse, the production of wine is deeply rooted in French capitalism. Barthes makes this point very clear in the essay.

“Its (red wine) production is deeply rooted/involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread” (Barthes 1957).

Barthes was brutal in his attack as always, going to the extent of stating that: ‘wine cannot be an unalloyed blissful substance, except if we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation’. Myth, in a way, works like a modern-day Lethe, inducing forgetfulness along with a veil of symbolic naturalness which in reality is yet another subterfuge. Remember that *Mythologies* (Barthes, Roland (1957): *Mythologies*, France: Les Lettres Nouvelles) was written in the mid-1950s and despite that, is still pertinent in an era overwhelmed by conspicuous consumers/consumption and one-dimensional men. No doyen of cultural studies has been this prescient, as many would attest.

In “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” (Barthes, Roland (1997): *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*), Roland Barthes deconstructs the traditional assumption regarding the role of food as a mere source of nutrition/nourishment. Barthes goes on to say that every country has its own type of food preparation that reflect their culture. Americans have a fondness for sugar and they consume an unbelievable amount every year, contributing to lifestyle diseases like obesity, diabetes and whatnot. Barthes repeatedly points out that food has been something that has always been overlooked and considered insignificant, despite its cultural significance. To Roland Barthes, food is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (Barthes 1997). Barthes gives all the credit for this transformation to ‘advertising’, an argument somewhat identical to Adorno’s notion of mass deception (Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer (1972): *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder and Herder) which figures in his seminal essay on the culture industry. It is also germane to bring in Marcuse’s ideas regarding one-dimensionality (Marcuse, Herbert (1964): *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press) and thereby make a connection between Barthes’ argument and Marcuse’s. The products that are available to the

consumers are quite indistinct, but the gullible consumers are deceived by the ads into believing that they have a choice, when they don't. False needs are generated and consumers take the bait without questioning, for their better faculties have become atrophied or they have become quiescent out of disuse/abuse. This desuetude of the crucial critical thinking abilities makes them easy prey to the luminescent anglers of advertising.

Barthes also enlightens his readers by pointing out that not only food but also tastes differ between classes. More privileged people tend to have a predilection for bitter substances. This explains why chocolate aficionados and self-proclaimed connoisseurs always prefer/endorse expensive dark chocolates made from cocoa beans imported from Ethiopia or Guatemala like the Lindt limited edition (containing 90-99% cocoa) over milk chocolate, which doesn't come with exorbitant price tag. Barthes in one of his essays from *Mythologies* [Soap-powders and Detergents (Barthes, Roland (1957): *Mythologies*, France: Les Lettres Nouvelles)] argues that the foam/bubble has always been a signifier of luxury. To some extent, this is true as all expensive champagnes and wines, as I mentioned earlier vie for the title of the most effervescent wine/champagne. Many expensive French cuisines like foie gras and oysters are topped with luxurious foam, demarcating upper-class customers from the rest. Lower-income families invariably prefer sweet and smooth materials (pertinent to their sartorial tastes as well). Barthes lists three main groups of values as far as food is concerned: commemorative, anthropological and health. "Food transforms itself into situation" (Barthes 1997) says Barthes before concluding his essay. Our tastes (in food) are shaped by our culture as much as our lives (and culture) are shaped by our taste (s).

Barthes towards the end of his famous essay 'Steak and Chips,' (Barthes, Roland (1957): *Mythologies*, France: Les Lettres Nouvelles) briefly refers to a statement made by a French general who had been deputed to Indo-China. After a decisive victory, the general orders a plate of steak with chips. For the French, steak and chips is a familiar dish and having one in the words of Barthes 'represents both a nature and a morality' (Barthes 1957). In fact, in France, the most sought-after portion is purple-coloured despite being less chewy. The myth surrounding steak is very similar to that of red wine owing to its purported alchemical property. For the French, steak is 'the heart of meat' and if one were to relish it, 'he/she assimilates a bull-like strength' (Barthes 1957). But in Indo-China, only the general understood the national symbolism of steak and chips. In Barthes' own words, "Chips, are the alimentary sign of Frenchness" (Barthes 1957).

### END NOTES

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