

Roland Barthes: Today, Here

List of Abstracts

"Remember, Body": Homoerotic Textual Intercourse between Roland Barthes' *Incidents* and the Poetry of Constantine Cavafy

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In "Hidden Things", Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933) writes:

"Let them not discover who I was/ from all that I have done and said./ An obstacle was there that transformed/ the deeds and the manner of my life."

The poem ends with the hope that "in the more perfect society,/ surely some other person created like me/ will appear and act freely." This, like any of Cavafy's 150-odd poems, was written sometime between 1891 and 1904 in Alexandria. This paper seeks to imagine that "other person" as Roland Barthes (1915-1980). In "December 1903" Cavafy says that an erotic memory, which one can infer as referring to his sexuality, "mould[s] and colour[s] [his] words and phrases,/ in whatever theme [he] get[s] into, whatever idea [he] utter[s]." In Paris, on 17 September 1979, Barthes writes, "I realized that I would have to give up boys", but then writes parenthetically "But then what will I do when I go out?... What will the spectacle of the world be for me?" Separated by seventy-six years, nationality, and widely different socio-sexual milieux, these two queer men seem to be speaking in unison, expressing the centrality of their sexuality to all that they experience, understand, conclude, and communicate.

This paper seeks to play match-maker between Cavafy and Barthes. Barthes' *Incidents* (1987) and Cavafy's poetry speak excitedly to each other, enthused by a vast commonality of feelings and experiences, although one lived out his life in furtive sexual repression and the other spent his life in a country that had legalised homosexuality in 1791. It asks the question that perhaps Cavafy would have asked Barthes: Has "the more perfect society" and the ability to "appear and act freely" brought happiness? Further, what does it mean to have enormous intellectual capital, great acclaim and vast talent but to be wracked at the same time by loneliness—the feeling of being ultimately unwanted, unloved, undesired?

The paper will include a discussion on the forms that Barthes' book, *Incidents*, and Cavafy's poems take (Barthes meant the book to "exactly be a book of haikus", and most of Cavafy's poems are short) and will dwell on the possibility that life is not a narrative, but just a collection of random incidents, but which are, nonetheless, part of a rhizomatic network suffused by the erotic.

From Comic Book to Chitrakar Performance: A Case of Intermedial Inscription

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I am looking at the ways in which a text emerges through successive stages of re-inscription as it moves between different narrative genres, the story being embodied in the text revealed through successive acts of translation and re-alignment with other mediums such as

traditional folk performance, puppet play and graphic novel. But what is the story – But is there always a single story that gets realigned? Or are there multiple stories?

Keeping in mind the well-known structuralist dictum articulated by Roland Barthes that texts become intelligible in the process of their transmission, it is possible to argue that the contours of a story -- any story-- are shaped by the readers, the so-called author being one possible reader among many.

Dead Writing: Barthes and Posterity

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In an interview given to *Tel Quel* in 1971 (Issue 47) Roland Barthes wrote, 'As for posterity, what can I say? It's a dead word for me.' The brief but dense reflections that follow on the subject of death and the afterlife of theory offer, I feel, a point of entry into issues of time, history, the contemporary, and an imagined future in Barthes' work.

In his essay 'What is the Contemporary?' Giorgio Agamben quotes Barthes' note that the contemporary is the untimely. Looking at specific instances from Barthes' analyses of narrative, myth, fashion, and photography, I will ask what it means to read Barthes today and what Barthes himself understood as the time of theory.

Lacan, Four Discourses and 'a' Lover's Discourse: Between Barthes and Badiou

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Lacan inaugurates the idea of Four Discourses – discourse with a 'capital D' – 'Discourses without words' (as against Foucauldian discourse) at the Law Faculty, Place du Pantheon, in *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (1969-70), as a *psychoanalytic re-writing* of the four basic types of social bond that exist in Western society. On the one hand, there is the Master's Discourse (which Lacan introduces on Nov 26 in 1969, as a psychoanalytic writing of 'governance') and the University Discourse (which Lacan introduces on Dec 3, 1969, as a psychoanalytic writing of 'teaching'). On the other hand are the Hysteric's Discourse and the Analyst's Discourse (introduced between Dec 17, 1969 and March 18, 1970; as a psychoanalytic writing of 'making oneself desirable', and of 'healing').

Does Barthes inaugurate a fifth Discourse in 1977, for a somewhat familiar but ill-understood social bond, namely the Lover's Discourse? Or is it not about *a* Lover's Discourse instead of *the* lover's discourse--i.e. the *fragments* of a lover's discourse? Do we need to mark sharply the difference between 'the Lover's Discourse' and 'a lover's Discourse: fragments'? Does Barthes write *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* because his notion of discourse is different from Lacan's notion of discourse- because he doesn't see language as just declarative or descriptive, but as *expressive*? Or does he write *A Lover's Discourse* because love cannot be translated into the structural requirements of a Lacanian Discourse and remains quintessentially 'a' lover's discourse, i.e. the discourse of 'a' lover or a 'lover', the one who loves, and cannot be rendered disincarnate enough to be Discourse in the Lacanian sense? Is *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, i.e. the book, an *enactment* (a kind of 'theatrical repetition' [not representation]) of a lover's discourse, of the *work* of love-ing, rather than an analysis of 'it'. Or is it bringing to prominence the *form* (a form "uninflected by referentiality or utility") of a lover's discourse? Is it then a kind of *writing zero degree* – "in which writing is not about

something other than itself"? This paper brings to dialogue Lacan (who writes *his* book of love, titled *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge - Book XX: Encore* 1972-1973) and Badiou (who writes his book of love, titled *In Praise of Love* in 2012) through Barthes. Badiou's work inaugurates the old question, once again, and yet again, *encore*: what is love? Badiou's work also includes a reinventing of love. For Badiou, love is "to see the world from the point of view of two rather than one". For Lacan, love is the impossible *supplement* to the fact that "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship" between the two. What then is it for Barthes? Or is the *what* (of love, with respect to love) a wrong question?

Barthes in the Digital Era

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"I like, I don't like" ... "*J'aime, je n'aime pas*: cela n'a aucune importance pour personne; cela, apparemment, n'a pas de sens", said Roland Barthes, before describing the "anarchic foam of likes and dislikes, a sort of distracted hatching" in a sentence that paints so accurately our digital existence 30 years before the Facebook era.

Sometimes presented as an "antimodern" or a moralist stuck in his love for classics, Barthes is, *volens nolens*, everywhere in our digital age: his sense of a global and flat world of signs is used to explain the world of data we live in; his everyday and embodied chronicle of a fragmented self is a powerful example of our ordinary and discontinuous but also networked identities; his intertextual and moving navigation through cultural links helps use the hypertext; his dream of an *écriture*, mixing writing and reading anticipates our online collaborative textualities. I'll try to show in this paper how Barthes' personal behaviour and cultural paradigms have, implicitly or explicitly, defined some of the most disruptive ways in which the web has changed our life.

Volatile Scales, Whispering Bodies: Tracing the 'Grain' in Asha Bhonsle's Voice

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In his well-known essay on music criticism, Roland Barthes has conceived the notion of the grain of the voice (in vocal music), describing it as an encounter between language and music. For Barthes, the grain is the body in the voice as it sings. In this paper, I will examine the voice of Asha Bhonsle, a leading playback singer of the Bmbay film music industry, through the Barthesian lens. By deploying a distinct vocal style – volatile shifts in scale and tonalities, whispering, sighing, yodelling and laughing, Asha Bhonsle has drawn attention to the non-verbal elements of a song. Through a textual analysis of Asha Bhonsle's duet songs, comic numbers, *mujras* and night-club songs, I will discuss the way Asha deploys obtrusive breathing in her songs in complete contrast to her older sister, Lata Mangeshkar. The materiality of the voice as discussed by Barthes can also be traced in the way Asha brings out an embodied style of singing in her cabaret numbers. It is this corporeality, the body in the voice, that produces the space of the night club. Finally, I would like to discuss the relevance of the concept of the grain of the voice at a time when voice production in popular film music is mediated through digital technologies.

Myths beyond Borders? On Teaching Barthes in Delhi

Maya Joshi, Lady Shriram College

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* has been a part of Delhi University's undergraduate syllabus in Literary Theory since 2000. As someone engaging with this text in the classroom over the years, I ask: What does it mean to read him thus, here and now? I look at the implications of this question in light of my own pedagogical engagement with theory and some aspects of contemporary Indian socio-political realities.

I will largely focus on the sections titled "Toys", "Plastic", "Photography an Electoral Appeal", and "Novels and Children" and discuss their resonance in classroom discussions. The latter cover not only on the multiple and often contradictory manifestations of the Nature/Culture divide that *Mythologies* is fundamentally premised on but also the unprecedented power of the media in contemporary political processes. Despite some silences, Barthes speaks across borders, regardless of whether they separate academic disciplines or nations. But does that turn him into a myth in precisely the terms he would question?

Memory, Mimesis and Self-reflective Storytelling: Reading *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes

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I intend to explore the entanglements of memory and storytelling in Roland Barthes' deliberately unreliable auto-biography by investigating how both processes are underpinned by a metacognitive mimetic quality characteristic of postmodern narrativity and autobiographical recall.

Drawing on recent research on memory, forgetting and cognitive psychology, especially the works of Eric Kandel and Marc Augé, I will seek to study Barthes' *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes as a poststructuralist text of self-reflective storytelling which attempts to situate the sentient self in an unreliable mimetic process. The aim of this lecture is to investigate how memory, mimesis and metacognition are aligned in Barthes' poststructuralist auto-biography which dramatizes as well as defamiliarizes the epistemology of embodiment, selfhood and recall.

The Republic of Signs: Becoming Animals in Contemporary India

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Barthes' semiological analysis of everyday life remains fascinating as a mode of (i) constructing new interdisciplinary objects for Symbolic interpretation, and (ii) subjecting naturalized national myths to a Republican scrutiny. Drawing on these key legacies of Barthes, my brief presentation will focus on the "forest of signs" that has grown around an odd couple of India's national animals: an endangered feline and a precarious bovine.

Languages at War: Roland Barthes on Signs, Culture(s) and Politics

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Many critics have been prone to dividing Barthes' intellectual life into two halves : the first one more political (Marxist or, more accurately, Brechtian) and theoretical (Barthes being a forerunner in France of semiology, «science of texts» and finally «the theory of text») ; the second one, more intimate and self-reflexive, if not autobiographical, with Barthes' interest now entirely vested in Literature.

I, on the contrary, wish to insist on the continuity and permanence of Barthes' twofold passion -- for Literature on the one hand, since the publication of his earliest articles *and* on the other for politics or, to phrase it more precisely, for the political dimension of all acts of signification, including Literature. In this presentation, I will concentrate on the latter aspect of Barthes' intellectual life, although it should be clear from the beginning that what he calls his 'heartbreaking love for littérature' cannot be separated from his political vision of language, cultures and signs.

I will first briefly explore Barthes' background in the context of the French Protestant tradition as well as in terms of his personal, social and ideological situation during his youth when he regarded himself as an outcast of sorts, demoted from the bourgeois status of his family-- a stern anti-fascist in the mid-30s, ideologically speaking. I will here rely on the very interesting new material released from the archives in these past months (*Album*, ed. by E. Marty, 2015).

I will then describe his 'situation' (in a Sartrean sense) at the end of WWII and the specific milieu in which he started to publish at the time (anti-Stalinist Marxists, mostly). I will also say a few words about his passion for and commitment to highly political forms of theatre, in order to show the political connection between his social criticism (in *Mythologies*) and his many interventions as a theatre critic. At this early stage of his intellectual career, Barthes, although clearly and explicitly influenced by Sartre, elaborates on his own conception of 'engagement' around the notion of 'moralité de la forme' or 'morality or ethics of form'.

Displacing political 'engagement' from the Sartrean notion of the intellectual as one 'taking sides' on all issues (though declarations, op-ed letters, manifestos, etc.), Barthes argues for an engagement at a deeper level in the use of language itself and in the analysis of all distortions and manipulations operated with or within language. Language—more specifically the language of criticism—is a weapon and may be used as such, just like Barthes did in his *Mythologies*. However, the social (or literary, or cultural) critic must be constantly aware of the possibility of his/her own misuse of language. Barthes thus never ceased to advocate a sound self-consciousness in our use of language, to avoid or defuse two major perils: 'imposture' and 'arrogance'. Imposture and arrogance should not be regarded, in Barthes' perspective, as 'psychological' or merely 'moral' concepts. Both concepts refer to specific positions of enunciation, both having to do with domination, with a will 'to seize'. (Barthes always supported the opposite notion, which he referred to zen buddhism of 'not-willing-to-seize', which he translated for his own purposes as a rebuke to all positions of appropriation or domination). In Barthes' eyes, the impulse towards domination through discourse lurks within language itself. Hence the famous (or as some would say--infamous) notion of language as 'fascist', expressed by Barthes in his inaugural speech at the Collège de France , is probably one of his most commented upon pronouncements. However, this provocative declaration was perfectly in line with Barthes' constant suspicion towards language as a domineering, even 'magical' force. A most important part of Barthes' heritage in this respect is the idea of a permanent self-awareness in our use of language, inasmuch as even the most

politically correct or well-meaning progressive discourse is always at a risk of becoming the new form of discursive arrogance. Only within this general frame of analysis can the relationships between language, culture and politics (as Barthes saw them) be understood and discussed to day.

In my closing remarks, I would like to dwell on Barthes's vision of such relationships in his texts and seminars, around three core questions on :

1) the war of languages (I will refer to Barthes' '*La Division des Langages*', *Complete Works* (2002), IV, 348 and «La Guerre des Langages», IV, 361).

2) the ambivalent status of culture seen by Barthes in the early 70s as a socially enforced, artificial peace (see Barthes, 'Languages at War in a Culture at Peace', *The Times Literary Supplement*, n° 3632, 8 Oct. 1971 ; 'La Paix Culturelle', *Complete Works* (2002), III, 100). Contemporary culture is described in his last course (1978-1979) as an anti-literary, if not illiterate, affair, run by the petty-bourgeoisie acting by proxy for the bourgeoisie.

3) the irreplaceable role of Literature as the unique 'discipline' allowing us to move beyond the constraints of language and the division of languages, and to convey intellectual, moral and political knowledge without imposing them upon us.

Barthes' ethical politics, as I see them, point towards the following:

- A realistic endorsement of three 'old notions': democracy, tolerance and contract — which provide for a 'provisional moral code' in Descartes' words. However, these three concepts (which have their roots in the philosophy of the Enlightenment) are to be supplemented by another concept which also dates from the 18th century: pity (a central concept in Rousseau's anthropology of mankind), rephrased by Barthes as *caritas* in Latin.
- A defence of Literature as both the most realistic and the most utopian of intellectual 'disciplines'. 'Utopia' here should not be taken in the sense of an impossible, non-existing place, but on the contrary in the sense of a desirable, possible space of conciliation between the individual and the group, transmission and innovation, desire and ethics, 'living-together' (*vivre-ensemble*) and allowing for the full development of singularity. Such conciliation, difficult as it is, pretty much summarizes what politics should be, for Barthes.

Roland Barthes and the Cinematographic Experience: The Enjoyment of the *Amateur Spectator*

Gabriela Trujillo, L'Ecole de Louvre

What were the binds between Roland Barthes and the Seventh Art? As a projective experience, a major entertainment and an essential form of art, cinema is for Roland Barthes a problematical practice. Barthes *does* go to the movies, and moreover, he conceives specific tools for an iconological analysis of films. As he includes cinema in his *Mythologies*, he also discusses the works of major filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini or Michelangelo Antonioni. Was he, for all that, a *cinophile*?

