

Article

The Mythologist as a Virologist: Barthes' Myths as Viruses

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to explore and explain the complex processes and mechanisms involved in creating myth signs as presented in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) through an interdisciplinary and an interdiscursive approach. The article presupposes that the mythic system of signification occupies a liminal space of a multiplicity of disciplines and discourses. The mythic sign integrates a myriad of epistemological spaces philosophical, scientific, and cultural. Therefore, this article wants to cross the borderlines between fields of knowledge to understand the unique position of the mythic sign. We are going to use scientific discourse of virology to investigate the parasitic and viral nature of the mythic sign. Moreover, we investigate the role of the mythologist in exploring the signs that are infected by ideology and how to demystify their intentionality and artificiality. Finally, we are going to rely on quantum physics to investigate the superposition of the mythologist and the role this position plays in understanding the ambiguous and multidimensional nature of the mythic sign.

Keywords: Barthes; signification; *Mythologies*; myth sign; linguistics; Philosophy; cultural studies; interdisciplinary; interdiscursive; virology; quantum physics; superposition



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1. Introduction

The French literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980) started writing monthly feature articles on post-Second World War French cultural phenomena. Barthes contributed a regular column, from 1954 to 1956, in the literary magazine *Les Lettres Nouvelles* entitled “Mythology of the Month”. These brief journalistic pieces were afterwards published as a collection of essays in the book *Mythologies* (1957), which became one of the most influential books in semiotics and one of Barthes's most widely read works to this day.

What contributed to *Mythologies* lasting legacy is the scope and diversity of cultural phenomena that Barthes examined, and the novel way of reading those cultural activities. Barthes produced 53 creative non-fiction articles in *Mythologies*. In those featured articles, Barthes excavates hidden levels of meaning until he reaches what he supposes to be the intended significance of such cultural phenomena. The range of subjects covered in Barthes' book is diverse and extraordinary: boxing and wrestling; Garbo's face; Romans pictured in movies; writers on vacations; a ‘Blue Blood’ cruise; confused literary critics; advertisements for detergents; Charlie Chaplin's films; margarine; toys; murder committed by an old man; Einstein's brain; French national beverages and foods; Striptease; pilots; plastic; tourists' guidebooks; Citroën car; the photograph of a black soldier saluting the French flag, among many other cultural topics.

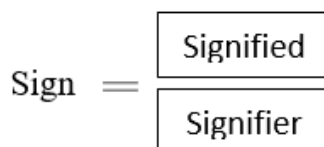
Barthes theorized that the superficially innocent cookery, posters, photographs and other phenomena were not really innocent products of mass culture. Barthes argues that all cultural materials were designed to control and shape social consciousness and to persuade the masses to accept the dominant bourgeoisie ideology. Barthes attempts to decipher mass cultural phenomena, and tries to expose their manipulating process to mythologize linguistic signs as natural and historic. In *Mythologies* Barthes attempts to demystify how,

the seemingly innocent and unmotivated, myths of bourgeois culture are superimposed on cultural phenomena without being recognized as manufactured and ideological.

Barthes argues that culture presents manufactured, intentional and ideological signs as if they were natural, innocent and unquestionable. *Mythologies* is an attempt to expose this process of *naturalness* whereby what is historical and culture-specific is presented as if it were natural, eternal, and thus universal. In this process of signification, a myth takes a purely cultural and historical material and transforms it into a natural and universal sign. Cultural-specific products come to signify something other than their true value. The new mythic sign hides the historical reality and cultural mechanisms that have engendered the original sign.

As a semiotician, Roland Barthes relies on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs and expands it to be applied into cultural studies. Barthes attempts to explore the mechanics of meaning-making in his cultural semiotics in order to search the deep core, hidden behind the surface level of meaning, in cultural phenomena. In contrast with Saussure, Barthes hypothesizes that the deep meaning is mythic and not linguistic. Accordingly, he postulates that myth is artificial or motivated and is a projection of the hegemonic ideology of the dominant class.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a Swiss linguist and philosopher, is regarded as the founder of 20th century linguistics and semiotics or semiology. Saussure has laid the foundation of this science in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*) that was published posthumously in 1916. In his theory of the semiological system, Saussure has postulated that any linguistic system has three different aspects in generating meaning as *sign*, *signifier* and *signified*. Accordingly, the *sign* is similar to a coin having two sides of a *signifier* and a *signified*. Saussure explains this sign triad where the sign designates the whole, the signifier is to the sound pattern, and signified refers to the concept [1] (p. 67). Saussure model can be illustrated by the following diagram:



In Saussure's semiological system, a linguistic sign is not correspondent to any referent in reality. The linguistic sign has two manifestations, the *signifier* which is the verbal form of the sign and the *signified* which represents the sign's mental concept. Saussure argues that this linguistic triad does not refer to a thing in reality. Such a sign acquires meaning not because of any connection with an outside object but rather because of an internal contrast between signifier and signified and other signs. Thus, Saussure emphasizes that the signification process, the connection between the signifier and the signified, is *arbitrary*. In this process of signification, the signifier and the signified cannot exist independently. The signifier provides form for the signified, and the signified provides the signifier with a specific meaning. Saussure, therefore, is only interested in the purely linguistic level of the sign, in this case, how sign functions to generate a denotative meaning. The connotative meaning, with its association with external non-linguistic factors, is not within the main focus of Saussurean semiotics.

In contrast with Saussure, Barthes directs his attention to the sign's connotative order. To Barthes, the Saussurean system of signification constitutes only the first-order semiotic system. In *Elements of Semiology* (1964) Barthes depends on the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev's (1899–1965) *linguistic hierarchy* theory that makes the distinction between the *content plane* and the *expression plane* where "plane of the signifiers constitutes the plane of expression and that of the signifieds the plane of content" [2] (p. 39). Further on, Barthes, still relying on Hjelmslev, argues "that any system of significations comprises a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C) and that the signification coincides with the

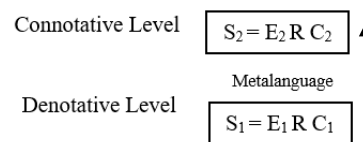
relation (R) of the two planes: $E R C''$ [2] (p. 89). For Barthes the first sign (S_1) with its two planes (E_1 and C_1) represents the denotative sign as:

$$S_1 = E_1 R C_1$$

The denotative sign is the first-order sign, in the language level, in a process of signification to produce meaning. S_1 refers to literal meaning of a sign, which is similar to the definition given in a dictionary. This denotative sign is empty of any ideological, cultural, and personal content.

To Barthes, this first-order sign is purely linguistic with no interaction of signification with ideological or political surroundings. Barthes interest with systems of significations expands beyond what is purely denotative. Therefore, to free himself from the linguistic limitations of S_1 Barthes expands this first system of denotation to where “such a system $E R C$ becomes in its turn a mere element of a second system, which thus is more extensive than the first” [2] (p. 89). In order to achieve this move, in the language level, from first-order sign to second-order sign Barthes relies on *metalanguage*.

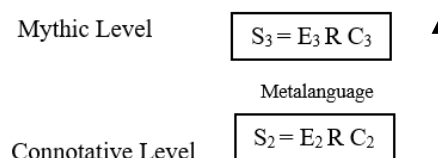
A metalanguage is a second-order system of signification which acts on a first-order system of signification. It is a sign which generates meaning out of an already previous sign [2] (p. 92). In a metalinguistic move, Barthes departs from S_1 to generate a new sign: S_2 . This new sign, which is engendered from the linguistic material from the already existent S_1 generates the connotative sign according to the following process:



Barthes draws our attention that the denotative sign as whole ($S_1 = E_1 R C_1$) has become a mere signifier (E_2) in the connotative level where E_2 comprises $E_1 R C_1$. The whole denotative sign is subsumed in the connotative signifier. This second-level connotative system forms a plane of expression where we interact with ideology, metalanguage, and, finally, myth [2] (p. 89).

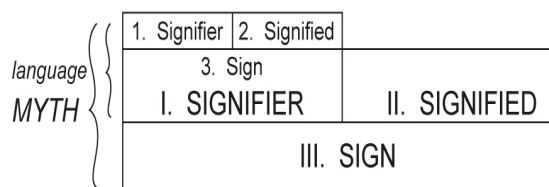
The movement from the denotative to the connotative does not stop the chain reaction of signification. The metalinguistic process of creating meaning from an already existent meaning extends beyond the connotative sign. However, the new second-order system of signification is not *naturally* generated as it is the case in the connotative sign. The process by which the connotative sign is created can be seen as a semantic necessity. As a “message without a code” [3] (p. 33), the denotative level alone cannot produce logical semantic material to create meaning, or if it creates anything it creates a nonsensical denotative meaning of the first-order. Hence, connotative sign is needed to make any sense or logic of the denotative sign. This movement eliminates the confusion created by the literal uncoded referent of the denotative sign. Thus, the denotative literal and uncoded linguistic material is utilized to generate the “fragment of ideology” of “the signified of connotation” [2] (p. 91).

Nonetheless, though the connotative level is coded but its connection to ideology and society is still *fragmented* and fragile. Barthes argues that “Nothing in principle prevents a metalanguage from becoming in its turn the language-object of a new metalanguage” [2] (p. 93). The connotative metalanguage starts to generate the mythic system of signification. The associative total, that is the sum total of sign, signifier, and signified [4] (p. 111), of the connotative level start to form the signifier of the mythic one according to the following:



where E_3 has subsumed the associative total of the connotative level and hence equals E_2 R C_2 . In addition, the connotative E_2 has already subsumed the associative total of the denotative and hence equals E_1 R E_1 . Consequently, the mythic sign S_3 comprises within its components linguistic denotative material and semantic connotative elements.

These various signification systems that create the associative total of the mythic sign provide it with its duplicity and ambiguity which makes it difficult to discern its ideological, motivated, and coded nature. Barthes represents this multidimensional system of signification as the following [4] (p. 113):



Such complex system of signification allows the myth—through metalinguistic signification—to hijack denotative linguistic material and connotative semantic material to generate a second-order system of signification.

Due to the complexity of the myth sign it becomes easy to conceal its coded ideological nature. Thus, the signifier of myth, with its equivocal existence in the denotative and connotative levels, makes it difficult to expose or to criticize. If one tries to expose the coded ideological content of the mythic sign, its signifier can simply be turned towards the first-order denotative meaning. The oscillation of the mythic sign creates a duplicity that allows its signifier to be “full on one side and empty on the other” [4] (p. 116), simultaneously. In contrast with the linguistic signifier with its arbitrary relation to physical reality, the mythic signifier establishes a relation to ideological reality and at the same time negates such relation altogether.

Contrary to Saussure’s linguistic system of signification, Barthes argues that this connection between mythic signifier and signified is intentional and motivated, and over a period of time, the connection becomes *naturalized*. In Barthes’ view the mythic signified is not arbitrary but it is rather ideologically motivated. Barthes emphasizes that “it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered” [4] (p. 117). Concerning the connection between signifier and signified, Barthes further asserts that the relation “which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially the relation of *deformation*”. The Saussurean semiological system which depends on arbitrariness and hence emptiness of signifier and signified, Barthes argues “cannot distort anything at all” [4] (p. 121). Therefore, as a result of such complexity the mythic sign can assume the form of a Saussurean linguistic sign that provides an “*alibi*” for the presence of an ideological concept.

Barthes, accentuating the double existence of the mythic sign, says that “the ubiquity of the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the *alibi*” [4] (p. 121). Myth, writes Barthes, “linked by a relation of negative identity” acts similar to an alibi that declares: “I am not where you think I am; I am where you think I am not”. The ability of the mythic sign where “its signifier has two sides for it always to have an ‘elsewhere’ at its disposal” locates it in a place of a “perpetual alibi” [4] (p. 122). These complex mechanisms of ubiquity, alibi, and hijacking enables the mythic sign to evacuate any cultural object of any historical component and presents it as unquestionable, timeless, and natural. Any trace of distortion of history is hidden under layers of denotative and connotative signs. The mythic sign does not reveal itself as coded or intentionally motivated by ideology to its consumer, rather it hides under the linguistic form of innocence and naturalness. This ideological content is purified, filtered, frozen and concealed by the oscillation between the mythic and the linguistic. Though the linguistic form is now filled by the mythic sign. However, “it can easily alternate with its actual signified meaning so as to hide in a kind of turnstile” [5] (p. 1158); [4] (pp. 121–122). It is this technique of “hide-and-seek” [4] (p. 117) of the mythic sign that Barthes is trying to decipher and to demythologize.

The game of “hide-and-seek” that conceals the ideological nature of the mythic sign complicates the position of the mythologist. Any attempt by the reader of myths to reveal the multidimensional nature of the sign. Its ubiquity, its double existence, its omnipresence, and its oscillation becomes a physical impossibility. The position of the mythologist is investigated in this article from the perception of quantum physics. This interdisciplinary theorization can be seen as the only approach to explain the complexity of the mythologist position.

Nonetheless, to explore such complex mechanisms and processes “Barthes was convinced that only those with semiotic savvy can spot the hollowness of connotative signs” [6] (p. 337). Barthes in *Mythologies* attempts to explore the unique position of the mythologist. He resorts to images of exclusion, alienation, estrangement, condemnation, sarcasm, hopelessness, and apocalypse to depict an image of the mythologist (157–158). Barthes asserts that though the mythologist is involved in the physical realities of ideology, politics, and culture, but “the mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality” [4] (p. 158). The mythologist becomes infected by the duplicity of his/her object of investigation. Though interested in the political dimension but the mythologist “status still remains basically one of being excluded”. The position of the mythologist is of involvement and action. Nonetheless, at the same time the mythologist “can live revolutionary action only vicariously” [4] (p. 157).

Barthes asserts that semiotics “remains a tentative science” that needs improvement. Barthes’ *Mythologies* can be read as an attempt to improve and expand Saussure’s semiology to “extensive systems of signs outside human language” [2] (p. 9). Thus, Barthes’ introduction of myth as a second-order system of signification, as an extension of semiotics to the realm of physical reality is a sign of the ever-evolving nature of, linguistics in general, and semiotics as a science [4] (p. 109).

Barthes is aware of the volatility of semiotics and the need of fresh looks and investigations as “there is no fixity in mythical concepts”. Therefore, and because of the “instability forces [of the myth] the mythologist [has] to use a terminology adapted to it”. Barthes asserts the need to always invent new discourse and neologisms

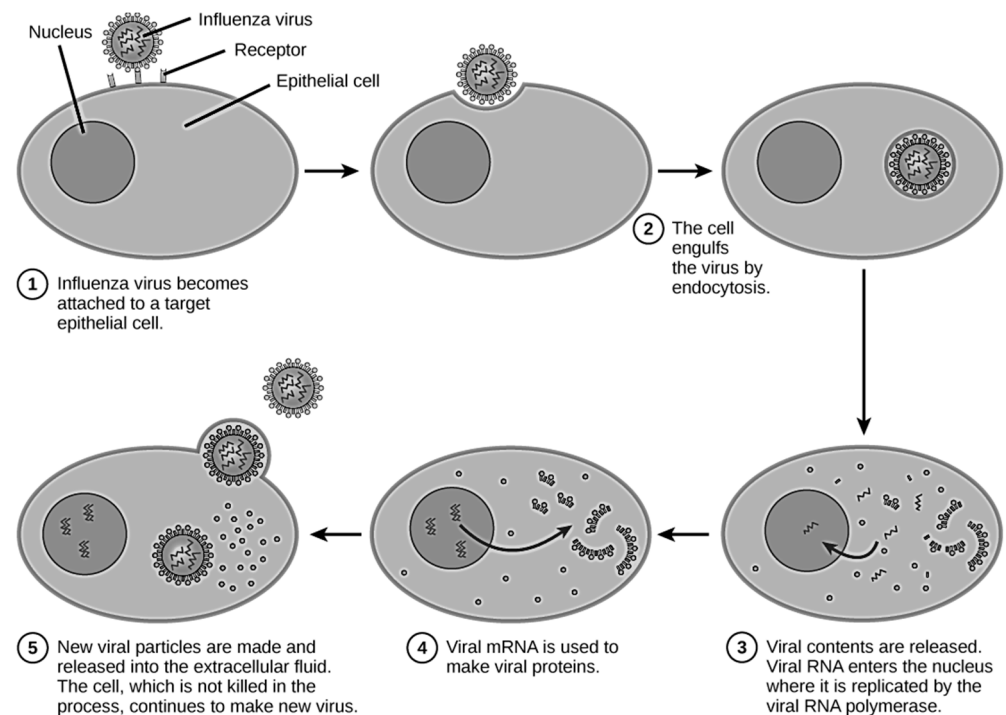
which are a constituting element of myth: if I want to decipher myths, I must somehow be able to name concepts. The dictionary supplies me with a few: Goodness, Kindness, Wholeness, Humaneness, etc. But by definition, since it is the dictionary which gives them to me, these particular concepts are not historical. Now what I need most often is ephemeral concepts, in connection with limited contingencies: neologism is then inevitable. [4] (p. 119)

This *inevitable* need to introduce new discursive practices and neologisms to explore the evolving and *ephemeral* concepts of semiotics is this article’s main idea. This article is an attempt to explore and explain the complex processes and mechanisms involved in creating mythologies through an interdisciplinary and an interdiscursive approach. The article presupposes that the mythic system of signification occupies a liminal space among a multiplicity of disciplines and discourses. The mythic sign integrates a myriad of epistemological spaces philosophical, scientific, and cultural. Therefore, this article wants to cross the borderlines between fields of knowledge to understand the unique position of the mythic sign and the mythologist. We are going to use scientific discourse of virology and quantum physics to investigate the parasitic and viral nature of the mythic sign and the uniqueness of the mythologist position. Thus, we investigate the role of the mythologist in exploring the signs that are infected by ideology and how to demystify their intentionality and artificiality. Finally, we are going to rely on quantum physics to investigate the superposition of the mythologist and the role this position plays in understanding the ambiguous and multidimensional nature of the mythic sign.

2. Viral Mythologies

Viruses are nature’s perfect parasites. It is scientifically acknowledged that once a virus penetrates a cell, “it hijacks the cellular processes to produce virally encoded protein that

will replicate the virus's genetic material." Viruses are equipped with mechanisms that are capable of "translocating proteins and genetic material from the cell and assembling them into new virus particles" [7] (p. 1028). Thus, Viruses cannot replicate on their own. Instead, they depend on a host cell to reproduce. This viral infection mechanism is illustrated in the following [8] (p. 2015):



The same viral mechanism is used by myth. Myths are signs perfect parasites. Myth, similar to viruses, hijacks the connotative sign and turns it into a mythic meaning or what Barthes calls signification. Signification here refers to the creation of mythic sign, it is a system of signification which has been produced through the occupation of an already existent linguistic sign. Myth is a metalanguage: a second-order sign which acts on a first-order sign, a language which generates its meaning out of an already existent meaning. Nonetheless, as Barthes also argues, the original, linguistic meaning is not completely deleted [4] (pp. 113–114).

Though myth depends on its existence on a system of language, a "myth is not meant to function—nor does it function—with the discourse of language like first-order signs" [9] (p. 12). Contrary to Saussure, where the arbitrariness of sign establishes that there is no logical or intrinsic relationship between signifier and signified, the mythic signification "is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy" [4] (p. 124). Myth's concepts are generated through what Barthes [4] (128) terms "adhomination"—through the emptying of the linguistic contents of the connotative sign in place of a new, ideologically based, cultural concept [8] (p. 12).

Thus myth, analogous to viral mechanism, empties the first-order linguistic sign from its connotative signification core and replaces it with an ideological mythic one. This mechanism conceals the artificiality of the mythic concept by masking it with the linguistic one. The disappearance of the mythic sign under the guise of a connotative sign enables myth to validate its

concept, it creates a *stability* that gives the impression of *being derived from the nature of things*, thus validating the *reality* of the concept (even though the concept is wholly artificial) and hiding the motivation of the concept behind that mask of veracity. (What Barthes describes in *Criticism and Truth* as *verisimilitude* [sic].) [8] (p. 12)

This is the main aim of myth: to create truths and to distort history. By adopting this viral tendency, “the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system” [4] (p. 130).

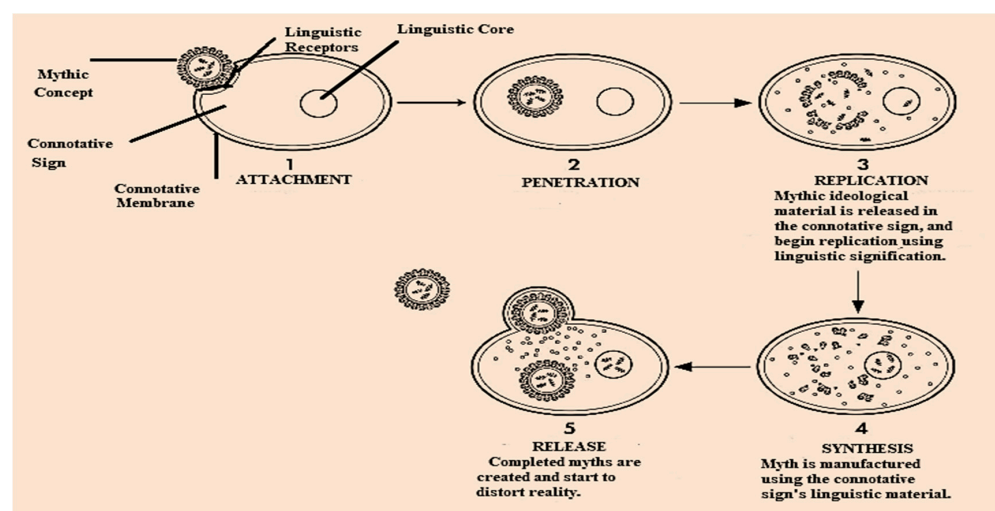
3. The Metaphor of the Virus

In order to understand the complex mechanism of creating myths and disseminating them in the ideological, cultural, and political space, this research relies on virology and the mechanism which viruses use to infect and distort cells. In this reading, the mythic signification system is studied as a parasitic ideological virus that invades the linguistic sign and sucks it dry of any meaning or concept. Myth is “something that insinuates and swells in the open meanings of language” [8] (p. 1159). We are going to borrow terms from biology and modify them to describe and explain mythic existence and role as a signification system.

Nonetheless, before explaining this cycle of mythic signification system, certain terminology and systems have to be established. Viruses “today are thought of as being in a gray area between living and nonliving” [8]. There is still a controversy among the scientific society about the nature of viruses, whether viruses are living or non-living organisms. Thus, a myth is similar to a virus as whether it is a linguistic system or a metalinguistic system. We use meta here to mean above or independent in addition to Barthes definition. As a (meta)²-language—a language that is independent and also generated by language—myth exists outside of linguistic signification but also cannot be realized without infecting a linguistic host-sign.

Thus, it can be argued that a myth exists as a product of ideology or culture or politics. Nonetheless, it cannot be realized unless it occupies a linguistic system of signification. Myth, as a non-linguistic organism exists in the gray area between language and reality, in a state of suspension between language and what language realizes as real. Similar to a virus [10], in its first metalinguistic nature—myth above or beyond language—myth cannot be identified or realized as a linguistic signification system as it does not contain the full range of required linguistic processes and, thus, it becomes dependent on another linguistic sign-host to provide many of the requirements for its mythic realization. Hence, the second metalinguistic nature of the mythic sign.

The myth’s life cycle as a system of signification that evolves as a hegemonic power able to distort reality and history and to superimpose ideological signs on linguistic and non-linguistic material can be delineated in the following [11]:



In order to understand this mechanism, we will adopt biological terminology and appropriate [4] (p. 118) them to the cycle of mythic signification.

As seen in the previous figure, the mythic cycle of signification passes through five stages:

1. Attachment: Myths are not capable of independent signification. Myths are suspended in the space that separates language from reality. In contrast with linguistic signs that are arbitrarily connected to reality, the mythic sign lacks that tendency. A mythic sign needs to attach to a linguistic sign-host in order to be realized. The myth in this stage exists as a concept that lacks linguistic form. Once the mythic concept assigns itself to a connotative sign it attaches itself to what we term as linguistic receptors. Such receptors enable the mythic concept to be attached to its compatible connotative sign. A mythic concept of an all-encompassing French colonial empire is not attached to the connotative sign of a movie star's poster for example. The linguistic receptors of the mythic concept start to penetrate the connotative sign's membrane and gradually enters the connotative sign's linguistic core.

2. Penetration: In this stage the mythic concept starts to usurp the linguistic core of the connotative sign. Any sign of penetration disappears and the connotative sign restores its natural linguistic form. The mythic concept starts to hijack the linguistic system of the connotative sign and uses it to generate the mythic sign. This parasitic strategy is balanced, as the mythic concept does not want to drain out all the linguistic resources of the connotative sign or else its unnaturalness will be exposed. A number of linguistic resources are left within the connotative sign to maintain this naturalness [12]. Thus, this strategy guarantees the survival of the myth by sparing its connotative sign-host. Myth starts its disguise as a connotative sign. This process is what Barthes calls signification. Signification is where the mythic sign begins the process of metalanguage: "a second-order language which acts on a first-order language, a language which generates meaning out of already existent meaning" [4] (p. 113).

3. Replication: As the mythic concept starts to drain out the connotative form from its linguistic core, it transforms the connotative sign into an empty signifier [4] (p. 127). The empty signifier is emptied of its linguistic connotative signification and only retains the connotative membrane—a linguistic shell or form—that preserves the naturalness of the emerging mythic sign. In this stage, the mythic ideological material is released from the mythic concept and starts to fill in the linguistic void. The mythic concept starts to replicate using what is left of the sources of linguistic signification of the connotative sign.

4. Synthesis: The mythic sign is manufactured using the sign-host existing linguistic material. The new mythic sign is synthesized but not yet presented as an independent system of signification. The mythic sign, in this stage, forms what we shall call a mythion. A mythion is a mythic sign whose force of signification is still dependent on the connotative sign's linguistic energy or material. A myriad of mythions is synthesized within the linguistic membrane of the connotative sign that reflect ideological, political, racial, economic, colonial, imperial, sexist, . . . etc. significations.

5. Release: The different mythions start to amalgamate to construct the mythic sign. Notably, mythions always use the same linguistic code as connotative signs. If they did not, they would have no way to appear as natural signification systems. Since mythions can always point towards two directions—linguistic and mythic—it is difficult to recognize their synthezation as ideological structures. The congregation of mythions transforms the connotative sign to a signifier of the myth. If we attempt to expose the photograph of the young soldier as a mythical sign of French colonialism, its signifier—engulfed within the connotative membrane—can simply be turned towards the linguistic literal meaning: one young soldier salutes the French flag. Any attempt to discover the literal level of the photograph's meaning, we find that this level is emptied of all its connotative material, since the point is not the real, young soldier but what he has become to signify within the context of French colonialism.

The stages of mythic creation as an ideological parasitic organism can explain the mechanisms and strategies of myth as a system of signification. One of the major characteristics of the mythic sign is its duplicity or ambiguity of signification. The mythic sign exists

in two semiotic systems, as a connotative sign in the first and a mythic signifier in the second. This ambivalent locus of the myth is equivocal in that it occupies, simultaneously, the sign from the linguistic system and the signifier from the side of myth. The mythic concept while it attaches itself to the connotative sign starts to drain it out from any meaning. Any connotative meaning or knowledge is vacated and is replaced with mythical signification. However, not all connotative meaning is drained out. Residuals and traces of the linguistic codes still exist that “presuppose a sedimentation of sense, a primordial evidence, a radical ground which is already past” [13] (p. 55). Such residual connotative material is necessary to provide the mythions with linguistic material to disguise it as a connotative sign.

The connotative form is filled by the codes of the mythological concept. However, the mythion can alternate between its actual signified mythic meaning and its sign-host of connotative form in what Barthes calls a “constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and form” [4] (p. 117). Thus, every myth “is encased in a verbal covering which is probably quite different from the core meaning underneath” [14] (p. 27). In this equivocal locus the mythic sign occupies a multidimensional realization as linguistic form and ideological concept, “full on one side and empty on the other” [4] (p. 116). Contrary to Saussurean system of signification that establishes an arbitrary link between signifier and signified, Barthes model argues for the intentional connection between the mythic sign and ideological realization which then becomes naturalized.

Barthes further explains the nature of the connection of the mythic signifier and signified, as fundamentally a relation of distortion. In myth, as Barthes argues the meaning is deformed by the concept. In fact, the mythic distortive effect becomes possible only because the myth manipulates the linguistic material of the connotative sign. In Saussurean semiotic system, in contrast with the mythic signifier, the connotative signifier, being arbitrary and empty, lacks such mythic distortive powers. The mythic signifier, contrariwise, has two aspects: one full which is the mythic meaning, one empty which is the connotative form. The release of the mythic virus displays the multidimensional nature of the mythic sign with its power to deform and at the same time retains a linguistic form. The mythic signifier is not empty or flat as in Saussure’s linguistic sign.

The duplicity of the released mythic sign plays on the contradictions between the Saussurean and the Barthean semiotic systems. Through its linguistic form the myth assumes the form of a Saussurean arbitrary and empty signifier. On the other hand, the Barthean mythic sign hides under this linguistic form to conceal its ideological intentionality and motivation. This evolution from the linguistic sign—now an empty shell—to the mythic signifier empties the linguistic sign from its meaning and transforms it into an infected sign by a parasitical myth. The mythic signifier erases the linguistic meaning of the previous system of signification. As the linguistic sign is emptied of its meaning and history its semantic void calls for a “signification to fill it” [4] (p. 116).

Through this viral mechanism myth is synthesized using the linguistic material of the connotative sign. The mythions absorb any meaning or history left in the linguistic sign and are motivationally used “to the myth to be uttered”. In contrast with the abstract linguistic Saussurean system of the signification—which is now reduced to a mere host-sign—the new mythic system “is filled with a situation”. The mythic signifier is not arbitrarily connected to its signified but becomes intentionally “tied to the totality of the world” [4] (p. 117). However, the mythic sign should not be read as a faithful representation of reality. When the representation of reality moves from the linguistic level to the mythic one the image of reality “loses some knowledge” [4] (p. 118).

Nonetheless, the loss of reality as the image moves between the two levels of signification cannot be detected in the mythic level. Thus, the knowledge presented through mythic signification becomes distorted and deformed; “it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function” [4] (p. 118). This deformity is not detected because it is still presented through the natural, stable, symbolic, unmotivated, and arbitrary codes of the linguistic sign. Replication and synthesis enable the mythic sign to be engendered by using the connotative sign’s linguistic material.

This process presents the myth as a natural linguistic sign that “appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, indisputable image” [4] (p. 117). Such mechanism allows the mythic sign to pass as a linguistic sign not infected by ideology or motivation.

4. The Mytho(viro)logist

When myth appears natural, and accepted as a natural linguistic sign, myth avoids investigation and starts to be accepted as given. Barthes calls attention to this viral mechanism, to the ways in which ideology and biases and assumptions are disguised and become accepted and treated as innocent and unquestionable signs [4] (pp. 116, 132). However, according to Barthes, semiotics can be the tool to reveal this ambiguous and invisible process where the myth fills the empty signifier with motivated and intentional ideological signs and at the same time appears natural and unmotivated.

Barthes maintains that “the image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image” [15] (p. 25). In other words, the myth infects images with its own ideological motivations and displaces them from their semiological level to another ideological one. This ability of the myth to infect the image without detection equips the myth with its ambiguity and duplicity. Myth, simultaneously, is semiological and historical, innocent, and ideological.

Such oscillation between the mythic and the linguistic “reproduces the physique of the *alibi*” where “there is a place which is full and one which is empty.” This “*alibi*” means that the connotative sign “is empty but present” and the mythic signifier is “absent but full”. However, it should be understood that between the mythic and the linguistic “there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place” [4] (p. 122). This tendency prevents anyone from recognizing the drained linguistic signifier which is infected by the mythions. Mythions replicate within the semiological sign’s linguistic appearance and propose a natural reading of a sign while it distorts history.

“Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion”, Barthes explains. He further emphasizes that myth “transforms history into nature”. Myth normalizes the eccentricities of ideology, naturalizes them, and makes them acceptable cultural norms through assuming linguistic appearance. By assuming a linguistic form, myth “is frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason” [4] (p. 128). The mythically infected linguistic sign is released into the system of signification, not detected by the consumer, as a distortive, artificial, motivated, and ideological sign. Only a mytho(viro)logist can detect the occurrence of myth-infected sign and reveal its artificiality and motivation.

The ambiguous and multidimensional nature of the mythic sign, where the myth is composed of the triad of signification—sign, signifier, signified—and a hybrid existential position as a semiological sign and a mythic one complicates the role of the mytho(viro)logist.

In order to diagnose the mythic sign’s duplicity and ambiguity with its complex hybrid position as a linguistic form and a mythic content, the mytho(viro)logist should assume a *quantum superposition*¹ [16]. This unique position enables the mytho(viro)logist to assume the role of a quantum omnipresent analyst that can exist on the two levels of sign—the semiological and the mythic—simultaneously.

Quantum superposition is a fundamental principle of quantum physics that describes the behavior of a system that exists in multiple states simultaneously. In other words, a quantum system can be in two or more different states at the same time, as long as those states are permitted by the laws of quantum mechanics. Quantum superposition, thus, has some strange and counterintuitive consequences, such as the fact that a particle can be in two places at once, or that it can have multiple different properties simultaneously.

In classical physics, an electron, for example, would be described as having a definite position and momentum at all times. However, in quantum physics, the electron can exist in a superposition of different positions and momenta simultaneously. This means that if you were to measure the position or momentum of the electron, you would find that

it has a probability distribution rather than a definite value. Quantum physics, therefore, is suitable to explain the complexity of the position of the mytho(viro)logist who tries to reveal the existential multiplicity of the myth.

This quantum position of the mytho(viro)logist as “one of *écrivains et écrivants*, the writer who produces *for* and *despite* society, respectively, and who oscillates between these two positions” [5] (p. 1161) enables the mytho(viro)logist to expose the mythic-infected sign and its attempt to distort history, and as he/she “deciphers the myth, [the mytho(viro)logist] understands a distortion” [4] (p. 127). Such privileged position enables the mytho(viro)logist to analyze, criticize, and even hijack myth itself as a third-order of signification [5] (p. 1161). The mytho(viro)logist can reveal the “game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and form which defines myth” [4] (p. 117).

Paradoxically, from such quantum superposition the mytho(viro)logist can move with the dynamics of the myth and at the same time “apply to myth a static method of deciphering” [4] (p. 122). Thus, the mytho(viro)logist can expose the whole viral mechanism of the myth that moves between first and second orders of signification avoiding any attempt of demythologization. The quantum superposition enables the mytho(viro)logist to trace the duplicity of the mythic sign revealing its intentionality and artificiality as a hegemonic ideological construct.

In conclusion, the proposed quantum superposition may explain Barthes’ diagnosis of the mythologist as a person who is “excluded”, “ambiguous”, “estranged”, “hopeless”, “doubtful”, and “condemned” [4] (pp. 157–159). The strangeness of the superposition with its omnipresence, hybridity, duplicity, and uncertainty may be the cause of the symptoms of being a mythologist. In this way, the mytho(viro)logist can recognize the complexity of signification only by becoming a sign: a myth.

In conclusion, this article is an attempt to cross the boundaries between scholarly, academic, and theoretical spaces. The long-established borderlines between disciplines have blocked the production of unconventional approaches to understand human activities. The approach adopted in this article opens new horizons to investigate and re-investigate established theories on both divide of scholarly research: the sciences and humanities. Furthermore, for further research it would be tempting to use this approach in exploring the role myths play in forming national identities, social biases, and political ideologies and the unique role the mythologist can play in forming such ideas or revealing them.

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Notes

- ¹ The term quantum superposition of the mytho(viro)logist is borrowed from quantum mechanics where it is used “to describe an object as a combination of multiple possible states at the same time” [16].

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