

# MYTHO LOGIES

ROLAND BARTHES

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY RICHARD HOWARD / ANNETTE LAVERS

 HILL AND WANG

A DIVISION OF FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

Hill and Wang  
A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

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Printed in the United States of America  
Originally published in French in 1957 by Éditions du Seuil, France,  
as *Mythologies*

Published in the United States in 2012 by Hill and Wang  
First American paperback edition, 2013

Annette Lavers's translation of Part II: *Myth Today* originally appeared  
in a selected version of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* published in 1972  
by Jonathan Cape Ltd., Great Britain, and Hill and Wang, New York.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:  
Barthes, Roland.

[*Mythologies*. English]

*Mythologies* / Roland Barthes ; translated from the French by  
Richard Howard [and] Annette Lavers.

p. cm.

Originally published: France: Éditions du Seuil, 1957.

ISBN 978-0-374-53234-5 (hardback)

1. France—Social life and customs. 2. Judgment (Logic)  
3. Semantics. I. Title.

AC25 .B3132 2012

844'.912—dc23

2011041658

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-8090-7194-4

Designed by Jonathan D. Lippincott

www.fsgbooks.com

7 9 10 8 6

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## A SYMPATHETIC WORKER

Kazan's film *On the Waterfront* is a good example of mystification. It concerns, as you doubtless know, a handsome, indolent, slightly brutal longshoreman (Marlon Brando), whose consciousness is gradually awakened to Love and to the Church (in the form of a shock priest, Spellman style). Since this awakening coincides with the elimination of a fraudulent and abusive union and appears to involve the longshoremen in resisting their exploiters, some viewers have supposed we've been shown a courageous film, a "leftist" film determined to reveal the worker's problem to the American public.

Actually, we are dealing once again with that truth vaccine whose very modern mechanism I have indicated apropos of other American films: a small gang of mobsters is made to symbolize the entire body of employers, and once this minor disorder is acknowledged and dealt with like a trivial and disgraceful pustule, the real problem is evaded, is never even named, and is thereby exorcised.

Yet it is sufficient to describe objectively the "roles" in Kazan's film to establish its mystifying power beyond a doubt: the proletariat here is constituted by a group of weaklings submitting to a servitude they clearly recognize but lack the courage to shake off; the (capitalist) State is identical with absolute Justice and is the only possible recourse against the crime of exploitation: if the worker can make contact with the State (for instance, by communicating with the police and its

investigative agencies), he is saved. As for the Church, in its phony modernist guise, it is merely a mediating power between the worker's constitutive poverty and the boss State's paternal power. Ultimately, moreover, this minor irritation of justice and conscience is soon resolved in the grand stability of a beneficent order, in which the workers resume their labor, the bosses fold their arms, and the priests bless both sides in their manifestly just functions.

It is the ending, however, which betrays the film, at the very moment when many supposed Kazan had cunningly insinuated his progressivism: in the very last sequence we see Brando, by a superhuman effort, managing to present himself as a conscientious good worker to the boss waiting to meet with him. Now this boss is obviously a caricature, and the audience murmurs: See how Kazan has managed to ridicule the capitalists.

Here or nowhere is the occasion to apply the demystification method proposed by Brecht and to examine the consequences of the attachment we feel for the film's main character. It is obvious that Brando is our positive hero to whom, despite his faults, the public gives its heart, according to that participation phenomenon without which, in general, we are reluctant to consider any entertainment possible. When this hero, all the greater for having rediscovered his conscience and his courage, exhausted, injured, yet still tenacious, heads for the boss who will give him work, our communion knows no bounds, we identify ourselves totally and unhesitatingly with this new Christ and participate unreservedly in his Calvary. Yet Brando's painful Assumption actually conduces to the passive acknowledgment of the eternal boss: what is orchestrated for us here, despite all the caricatures, is the *restoration of order*; with Brando, with the longshoremen, with all the workers of America, we put ourselves, with a sense of victory and relief, back in the boss's hands which it serves no further purpose to portray

as tainted: we have long since been snared in a fatal communion with this longshoreman who discovers a sense of social justice only to bestow it as a homage to American capital.

As we see, it is the *participational* nature of this scene which objectively makes it an episode of mystification. Trained to love Brando from the start, we can no longer at any point criticize him or even admit we are conscious of his objective stupidity. Now it is precisely against the danger of such mechanisms that Brecht proposed his method of *alienation*. Brecht would have asked Brando to *show* his naïveté, to make us understand that despite all the sympathy we may feel for his misfortunes, it is still more important that we see their causes and their remedies. We can sum up Kazan's mistake by saying that what should have been judged was much less the capitalist than Brando himself. For there is much more to expect from the rebellion of victims than from the caricature of their executioners.

## GARBO'S FACE

Greta Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when the apprehension of the human countenance plunged crowds into the greatest perturbation, where people literally lost themselves in the human image as if in a philter, when the face constituted a sort of absolute state of the flesh which one could neither attain nor abandon. Some years earlier, Valentino's face caused suicides; Garbo's still participates in that same realm of *amour courtois* when the flesh develops certain mystical sentiments of perdition.

It is without a doubt an admirable face-as-object; in *Queen Christina*, a film shown again here in recent years, the star's makeup has the snowy density of a mask; it is not a painted face but a face in plaster, protected by the surface of its shadows and not by its lineaments; in all this fragile and compact snow, only the eyes, black as some strange pulp but not at all expressive, are two rather tremulous wounds. Even in its extreme beauty, this face not drawn but instead sculptured in something smooth and friable, which is to say both perfect and ephemeral, matches somehow Chaplin's flour-white complexion, those vegetally dark eyes, his totemic visage.

Now, the temptation of the total mask (the mask of antiquity, for example) may imply less the theme of secrecy (as is the case with the Italian half mask) than that of an archetype

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*See illustration 7.*

of the human face. Garbo produced a sort of Platonic idea of the human creature, which accounts for her own face being virtually sexless without being at all "dubious." It's true that the film (*Queen Christina* is alternately a woman and a young cavalier) lends itself to this indeterminacy; but Garbo does not give any kind of travestied performance; she is always herself, frankly revealing under her crown or her wide-brimmed felt hats the same countenance of snow and solitude. Her nickname, *Divine*, probably intended to suggest less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where things are formed and finished with the greatest clarity. She herself knew this: How many actresses have consented to let the crowd watch the disturbing maturation of their beauty? Not Garbo: the Essence must not degrade, her visage could never have any other reality than that of its intellectual perfection, even more than its plastic one. The Essence has gradually dimmed, progressively veiled by dark glasses, hooded capes, and various exiles; but it has never altered.

Still, in that deified countenance, something sharper than a mask appears: a sort of deliberate and therefore human relation between the curve of the nostrils and the superciliary arcade, a rare, individual function between two zones of the face; the mask is merely an addition of lines, the face is above all a thematic recall of the former to the latter. Garbo's face represents that fragile moment when cinema is about to extract an existential beauty from an essential beauty, when the archetype will be inflected toward the fascination of perishable figures, when the clarity of carnal essences will give way to a lyric expression of Woman.

As a moment of transition, Garbo's face reconciles two iconographic ages, assures the passage from terror to charm. We know that in our own moment we are at the other pole of this evolution: Audrey Hepburn's face, for instance, is individualized

not only by its specific thematics (woman-as-child, woman-as-cat), but also by her person, by a virtually unique specification of the face, which has nothing essential left in it but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions. As a language, Garbo's singularity was of a conceptual order, Audrey Hepburn's of a substantial order. Garbo's face is an Idea, Hepburn's an Event.

## SHOCK PHOTOS

In her book on Brecht, Geneviève Serreau referred to a photograph from *Match* showing the execution of Guatemalan Communists; she noted accurately that this photograph is not terrible in itself, and that the horror comes from the fact that *we are looking at it* from inside our freedom; an exhibition of Shock Photos at the Galerie d'Orsay, very few of which, precisely, manage to shock us, paradoxically confirms Serreau's remark: it is not enough for the photographer to *signify* the horrible for us to experience it.

Most of the photographs exhibited to shock us have no effect at all, precisely because the photographer has too generously substituted himself for us in the formation of the subject: he has almost always *overconstructed* the horror he is proposing, adding to the *fact*, by contrasts or parallels, the intentional *language* of horror: one of them, for instance, places side by side a crowd of soldiers and a field of skulls; another shows us a young soldier looking at a skeleton; another catches a column of prisoners passing a flock of sheep. Now, none of these photographs, all too skillful, touches us. This is because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing—except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence: we are linked to these images only

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*See illustrations 8 and 9.*

by a technical interest; overindicated by the artist himself, for us they have no history, we can no longer *invent* our own reception of this synthetic nourishment, already perfectly assimilated by its creator.

Other photographers have tried to surprise, having failed to shock us, but the mistake in principle is the same; they have attempted, for example, to catch, with great technical skill, the rarest moment of a movement, its extreme point, the leap of a soccer player, the levitation of objects in a haunted house . . . But here again the spectacle, though direct and not at all composed of contrasting elements, remains too constructed; capture of the unique moment appears gratuitous, too intentional, the product of an encumbering will to language, and these successful images have no effect on us; the interest we take in them does not exceed the interval of an instantaneous reading: it does not resound, does not disturb, our reception closes too soon over a pure sign; the perfect legibility of the scene, its *formulation* dispense us from receiving the image in all its scandal; reduced to the state of pure language, the photograph does not disorganize us.

Painters have had to solve this same problem of the acme of movement, but they have had far greater success. Under the Empire, for example, having to reproduce certain instantaneous views (a horse rearing, Napoleon extending his arm on the battlefield, etc.), painters have left to movement the amplified sign of the unstable, what we might call the numen, the solemn shudder of a pose nonetheless impossible to fix in time; it is this motionless overvaluation of the ineffable—which will later, in the cinema, be called *photogeny*—which is the very site where art begins. The slight scandal of those exaggeratedly rearing horses, of that Emperor frozen in an impossible gesture, that persistence of expression we might also call rhetorical, add to the reading of the sign a kind of disturbing challenge, sweeping the reader of the image into an

astonishment less intellectual than visual precisely because it fastens him to the surface of the spectacle, to his optical resistance and not immediately to its signification.

Most of the shock photos we have been shown are false, just because they have chosen an intermediate state between literal fact and overvalued fact: too intentional for photography and too exact for painting, they lack both the letters' scandal and art's truth: the photographer has made them into pure signs, without consenting to give these signs at least the ambiguity, the delay of a density. Hence it is logical that the only true shock photos of the exhibition (whose principle remains quite praiseworthy) should be the news-agency photographs, where the fact, surprised, explodes in all its stubbornness, its literality, in the very obviousness of its obtuse nature. The executed Guatemalans, the grief of Aduan Malki's fiancée, the murdered Syrian, the policeman's raised truncheon—these images astonish because at first glance they seem alien, almost calm, inferior to their legend: they are visually diminished, dispossessed of that numen which the painters would not have failed to add to them (and rightly, since they were making paintings). Deprived of both its song and its explanations, the *naturalness* of these images compels the spectator to a violent interrogation, commits him to a judgment which he must elaborate himself without being encumbered by the demiurgic presence of the photographer. Here we are indeed concerned with that critical catharsis Brecht demands, and no longer, as in the case of painting, with a emotive purgation: thus perhaps we can rediscover the two categories of the epic and the tragic. The literal photograph introduces us to the scandal of horror, not to horror itself.

## TWO MYTHS OF THE NEW THEATER

If we are to judge by a recent festival of young companies, the new theater angrily inherits the myths of the old (so that it is hard to tell what it is that distinguishes the one from the other). We know, for example, that in the bourgeois theater the actor, "devoured" by his role, is supposed to seem fired by a veritable conflagration of passion. She must seethe at all costs, i.e., burn and at the same time spill over, whence the moist forms of this combustion. In one new play (which won a prize), the two male partners spread themselves in liquids of all kinds, tears, sweat, and saliva. It was as if we were watching a dreadful psychological labor, a monstrous torsion of the internal tissues, as if passion were a huge wet sponge squeezed by the playwright's implacable hand. The intention of this visceral tempest is comprehensible enough: to make "psychology" into a quantitative phenomenon, to compel laughter or suffering to assume simple metrical forms, so that passion, too, becomes a merchandise like any other, an object of commerce inserted in a numerical system of exchange: I give my money to the theater, in return for which I demand a clearly visible, almost computable passion; and if the actor gives full measure, if he can make his body work before my eyes without cheating, if I cannot doubt the trouble he takes, then I shall declare the actor to be excellent, I shall evidence my joy at having invested my money in a talent worthy of it, returning it to me a hundredfold in the form of real tears, real sweat. Combustion's great advantage is

of an economic order: my spectator's money has a verifiable yield at last.

Naturally the actor's combustion decks itself out in spiritualized justifications: the actor gives himself over to the demon of the theater, he sacrifices himself, allows himself to be eaten up from inside by his role: his generosity, the gift of his body to Art, his physical labor are worthy of pity and admiration; this muscular labor is acknowledged, and when, exhausted, drained of all his humors, he appears in front of the curtain at the end, we applaud him like a champion weight lifter or hunger artist, and we secretly suggest he go and restore himself somewhere, renew his inner substance, replace all that water by which he has measured out the passion we have bought from him. No bourgeois public resists so obvious a "sacrifice," and I suppose that an actor who knows how to weep or sweat onstage is always certain to triumph: the obviousness of his labor makes it unnecessary to judge further.

Another unfortunate element in the heritage of the bourgeois theater is the myth of the "find." Veteran directors make their reputation out of it. Playing *La Locandiera*, one young troupe flies the furniture from the ceiling for each act. Of course this is unexpected, everyone marvels at the invention: the trouble is, there is no reason for it, the device is evidently directed by an imagination at bay, craving something new at any price; since by now we have exhausted all artificial methods for setting the stage, since modernism and the avant-garde have saturated us with these scene changes in full view where some servant comes—supreme audacity—and sets down three chairs before our very eyes, the director now resorts to the last free space, the ceiling. The method is quite gratuitous, a matter of pure formalism, but nevertheless: in the bourgeois public's eyes, staging is never anything but a technique of such finds, and certain "animators" are very indulgent as to these requirements: for them it is enough to invent. Here again, our

theater relies on the harsh law of exchange: it is necessary and sufficient that the director's provisions be visible and that each of us can verify the yield on his investment: whence an art that seeks the swiftest possible issue and chiefly manifests itself as a discontinuous—and therefore computable—series of formal successes.

Like the actor's combustion, the "find" has its disinterested justification: the effort is to give it the warrant of a "style": flying the furniture from the ceiling will be presented as an offhand operation, in harmony with that climate of lively irreverence traditionally ascribed to *commedia dell'arte*. Of course, style is almost always an alibi, meant to elude the play's profound motivations: to give a Goldoni comedy a purely "Italian" style (harlequinade, mime, bright colors, half masks, dance movements, and the rhetoric of nimbleness) is a cheap way of avoiding any social or historical content, thwarting the acute subversion of civic relationships—in a word, it is a mystification.

It would be difficult to overstate the ravages of "style" on our bourgeois stages. Style excuses everything, absolves us from everything, notably any historical reflection; it imprisons the spectator in the servitude of a pure formalism, so that the revolutions of "style" are themselves no more than formal: the avant-garde director will be the one who dares substitute one style for another (without ever resuming contact with the play's real basis), converting, like Barrault's production of *The Oresteia*, our tragic academicism into a voodoo festival. But this comes down to the same thing; it gets us no further to replace one style by another: Aeschylus the Bantu author is no less false than Aeschylus the bourgeois one. In the art of the theater, style is a technique of evasion.



from above, objects at once close up and inaccessible, whose consumption can readily be accomplished in a single glance. This is, in the full sense of the word, an advertisement cuisine, totally magical, especially if we remember that this magazine is read for the most part in low-income homes. The latter, moreover, explains the former: it is because *Elle* is addressed to a working-class public that it is very careful not to postulate an economical cuisine. Have a look at *L'Express*, for example, whose exclusively bourgeois public enjoys a comfortable purchasing power: its cuisine is real, not magical; *Elle* prints the recipe for fantasy partridges, *L'Express* for salade niçoise. *Elle's* public is entitled only to fiction, the public of *L'Express* can be offered real dishes, with every assurance that it can prepare them.

## THE *BATORY* CRUISE

Since there are now to be bourgeois trips taken in Soviet Russia, the French press has begun to elaborate certain myths of comprehension with regard to the Communist reality. Messieurs Sennep and Macaigne, of *Le Figaro*, having embarked on the *Batory*, have written for their paper the sketch of a new alibi, the impossibility of judging a country like Russia in a few days. Hasty conclusions are no good, Monsieur Macaigne declares gravely, ridiculing his traveling companions and their generalizing mania.

It is quite entertaining to see a paper which promulgates anti-Sovietism year after year on the basis of gossip a thousand times more improbable than an authentic stay, however short, in the USSR, here suffering a fit of agnosticism and wrapping itself in the noble cloak of an insistence on scientific objectivity, at the very moment when its envoys can at last approach what they used to speak of so readily and so decisively from a distance. This is because, for the requirements of his cause, the journalist divides up his functions, like Maître Jacques his garments. To whom do you want to speak? To Monsieur Macaigne the professional journalist who informs

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*Eight hundred French tourists—a few journalists among them—embarked on the Batory cruise to travel to Russia in late August 1955. In September and October of that same year, war veterans refused to take service in the Algerian War, hence causing disruption in France's engagement in the early stages of the conflict.*

and who judges, in a word who *knows*, or to Monsieur Macaigne the innocent tourist who out of pure probity wants to draw no conclusions from what he sees? This *tourist* is a wonderful alibi here: thanks to him, one can look without understanding, travel without taking any interest in political realities; the tourist belongs to a subhumanity deprived of judgment and who ridiculously exceeds his condition when he claims to have any. And Monsieur Macaigne mocks those of his fellow travelers who seem to have had the absurd notion of adding to the sights of the street a few figures, a few general facts, the rudiments of a possible depth in the knowledge of an unknown country: the crime of *lèse-tourisme*, i.e., of *lèse-obscurisme*, which, at *Le Figaro*, is not forgiven.

Hence for the general theme of the USSR as a permanent object of criticism has been substituted the seasonal theme of the street, the only reality granted to the tourist. The street has suddenly become a neutral terrain, where one can observe without claiming to conclude. But we discover what observations are involved. For this honest reserve never prevents tourist Macaigne from pointing out in the immediate life before him several awkward accidents likely to recall Soviet Russia's barbarous vocation: the Russian locomotives emit a long moan quite unrelated to the whistle of ours; the station platforms are wooden; the hotels are badly run; there are Chinese characters written on certain trucks (theme of the yellow peril); finally, a fact which reveals a truly retarded civilization, there are no bistros in Russia—nothing but pear juice!

But above all, the myth of the street allows him to develop the major theme of all political mystifications: the divorce between the people and the regime. Even if the Russian people are saved, it is as the reflection of French liberties. That an old woman should burst into tears, that a dockworker (*Le Figaro* is social) should offer flowers to the visitors from Paris, have less to do with an emotion of hospitality than with the expres-



1. The actor Gérard Philipe in 1951.

(© Ministère de la Culture/Médiathèque du Patrimoine,  
Dist. RMN/Art Resource NY)



2. Miss Europe, *Paris-Match*, issue #287, September 25, 1954. (© Paris-Match/Scoop)



3. Marlon Brando, *Paris-Match*, issue #293, November 6, 1954. (© Paris-Match/Scoop)

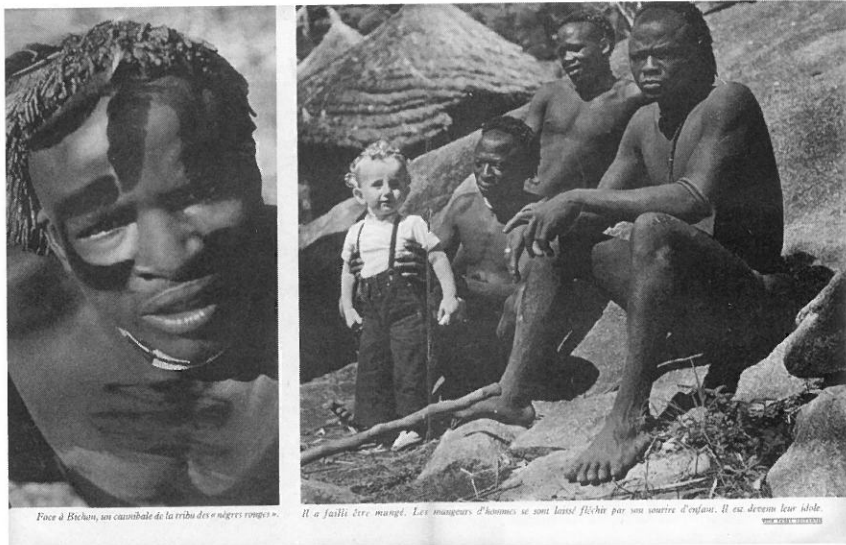


4. Abbé Pierre, *Paris-Match* cover, issue #255, February 13, 1954. (© Hubert de Segonzac/Paris-Match/Scoop)



5. Floods, *Paris-Match*, issue #305, January 29, 1955. (© Paris-Match/Scoop)





6. The child Bichon in Africa, *Paris-Match*, issue #305, January 29, 1955.  
 (© Paris-Match/Scoop)



7. Greta Garbo in the movie *Queen Christina* (1933). (© Everett Collection)



8. Malki's fiancée, *Paris-Match*, issue #319, May 7, 1955. (© Paris-Match/Scoop)



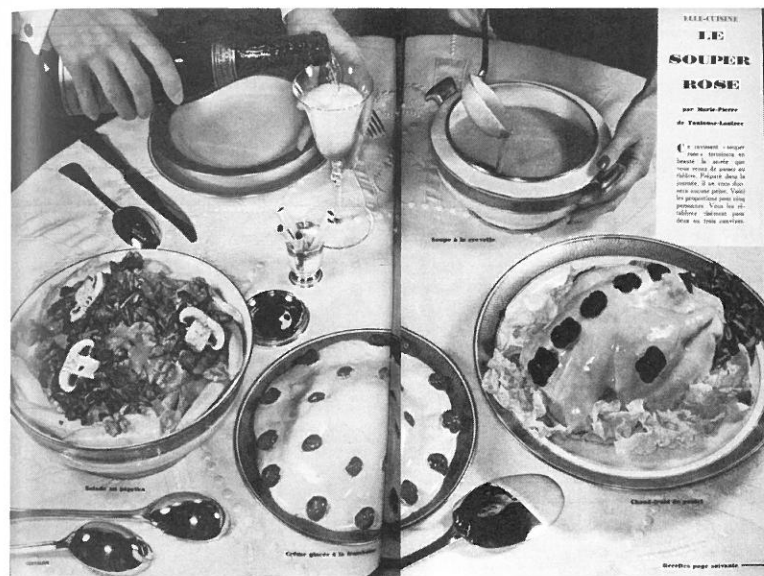
9. Execution of Guatemalan Communists, *Paris-Match*, issue #276, July 10, 1954. (© Paris-Match/Scoop)



10. Louison Bobet cycling up Mont Ventoux, stage 11 in 1955 Tour de France.  
(© Presse Sports)



11. Cyclists in Saint-Gaudens-Pau, stage 18 in 1955 Tour de France.  
(© Presse Sports)



12. "The Pink Dinner," *Elle* magazine, issue #477, January 31, 1955.  
(© Elle/Scoop)

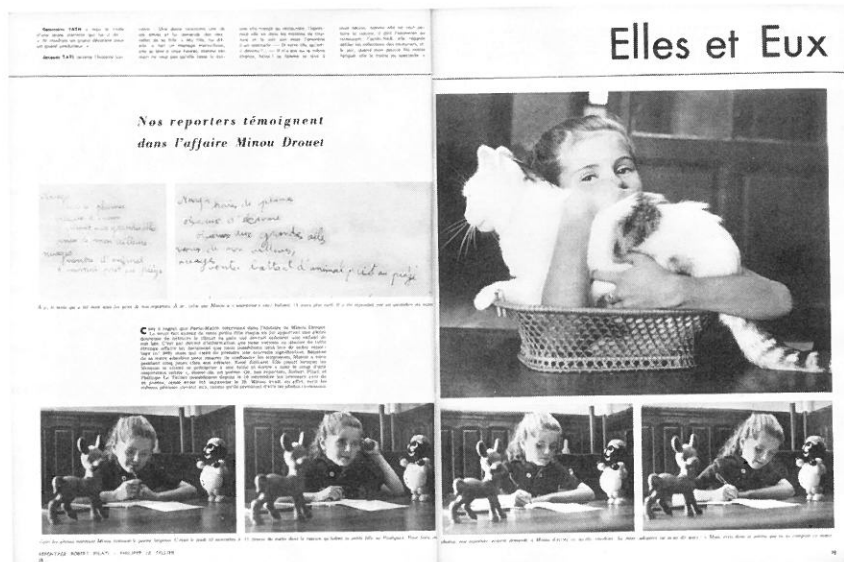


13. The new Citroën car, *Paris-Match* cover, issue #340, October 15, 1955.  
(© Paris-Match/Scoop)

sion of a political nostalgia: the French bourgeoisie *en voyage* is the symbol of French freedom, French happiness.

Hence it is only when it has been illumined by the sun of capitalist civilization that the Russian people can be recognized as spontaneous, affable, generous. Then there will be nothing but advantages in revealing their overflowing kindness: which always signifies a deficiency of the Soviet regime, a plenitude of Western happiness: The "indescribable" gratitude the young Intourist guide expresses to the doctor (from Passy) who offers her nylons certainly indicates the economic backwardness of the Communist regime and the enviable prosperity of Western democracy. As always (and I have remarked on the phenomenon apropos of the *Blue Guide*), we pretend to treat as comparable terms privileged luxury and popular standing; we ascribe to the credit of all of France the inimitable chic of our Parisian toilette, as if all Frenchwomen dressed themselves chez Dior or Balenciaga; and we photograph the young Soviet women dazed by French fashions as if we were dealing with a primitive tribe stopped cold by the fork or the phonograph. In a general way, the trip to the USSR serves chiefly to establish the bourgeois honors of Western civilization. Parisian gowns, locomotives which whistle rather than moan, the bistros, pear juice abandoned, and above all, the French privilege par excellence: Paris, i.e., a combination of grand couturiers and the Folies-Bergère: it is this inaccessible treasure which apparently stimulates the Russians' dreams, according to the *Batory* tourists.

In the face of which the regime can remain faithful to its caricature, that of an oppressive order which maintains everything in the uniformity of machines. The waiter in the sleeping car having asked Monsieur Macaigne to return the spoon with his glass of tea, Monsieur Macaigne deduces (always in a great gesture of political agnosticism) the existence of a gigantic paperwork bureaucracy whose sole concern is to keep up



14. Minou Drouet at home playing and writing, *Paris-Match*, issue #348, December 10, 1955. (© Paris-Match/Scoop)

the exact inventory of teaspoons. A new pasture for national vanity, quite proud of the disorder of the French. The anarchy of customs and of superficial behavior is an excellent alibi for order: individualism is a bourgeois myth which allows us to vaccinate the order and tyranny of class with a harmless freedom: the *Batory* brought the flabbergasted Russians the spectacle of a glamorous freedom, that of chattering during museum visits and "being funny" in the metro.

No question but that "individualism" is a luxury product for export only. In France, and applied to an object of quite different importance, it has, at least for *Le Figaro*, another name. When four hundred Air Force veterans, called up for North African service, refused to serve one Sunday, *Le Figaro* no longer spoke of the sympathetic anarchy and enviable individualism of the French: no longer any question here of museum or metro, but rather of colonial investments and big money; whereupon "disorder" was no longer the phenomenon of a glorious Gallic virtue, but the artificial product of a few "agents"; it was no longer glamorous but *lamentable*, and the *monumental lack of discipline* of the French, formerly praised with so many waggish and self-satisfied winks, has become, on the road to Algeria, a shameful treason. *Le Figaro* knows its bourgeoisie: freedom out front, on display, but Order back home, a constitutive necessity.

## THE MAN IN THE STREET ON STRIKE

There are still people for whom a strike is a scandal: i.e., not only a mistake, a disorder, or a misdemeanor, but a moral crime, an intolerable action which in their eyes is an offense to Nature. *Inadmissible, scandalous, revolting* are the words used by certain readers of *Le Figaro* about a recent strike. This is a language which dates, in fact, from the Restoration and which expresses its profound mentality; that was the period when the bourgeoisie, only recently in power, operated a kind of crisis between Morality and Nature, giving the one the protection of the other: fearing they would have to naturalize Morality, they moralized Nature, pretended to identify the political and the natural order, and ended by declaring immoral everything which contested the structural laws of the society they were determined to defend. To Charles X's prefects as to *Le Figaro's* readers today, a strike seemed first of all a challenge to the prescriptions of moralized reason: to strike is "to defy the world," i.e., to infringe less a civic than a "natural legality," to attack the philosophic basis of bourgeois society, that mixture of morality and logic which is *common sense*.

For the scandal proceeds from an inconsistency: a strike is scandalous because it affects precisely those whom it does not concern. It is reason which suffers and rebels: direct, mechanical, one might say computable causality, which has already appeared to us as the basis of petit bourgeois logic in Monsieur Poujade's speeches—this causality is disturbed: a strike's

effect is incomprehensibly remote from its cause, quite escapes it, and it is this which is intolerable, shocking. Contrary to what we might suppose about petit bourgeois dreams, this class has a tyrannical, infinitely sensitive notion of causality: the basis of its morality is not magical at all, but rational. Only, it is a linear, narrow rationality based on a virtually numerical correspondence of causes and effects. What this rationality lacks is obviously the notion of complex functions, the imagination of a remote operation of determinisms, of a solidarity of events which the materialist tradition has systematized under the name of *totality*.

Such a restriction of effects requires a division of functions. We might readily imagine that "men" are united: therefore, we oppose not man to man, but the striker to the ordinary man. The ordinary man (also called the man in the street, whose conglomeration received the innocent name of *population*: we have already seen all this in Monsieur Macaigne's vocabulary)—the ordinary man is an imaginary, even algebraic character thanks to whom it becomes possible to break up the contagious dispersion of effects and to retain a reduced causality about which we will be able to reason calmly and virtuously. By arguing a special status in the worker's general condition, bourgeois reason breaks the social circuit and demands for its own profit a solitude which it is the strike's very function to deny: the strike protests against what is expressly addressed to it. The man in the street and the taxpayer (that other alias) are literally characters, i.e., actors promoted according to the needs of the cause to surface roles, their mission is to preserve the essentialist separation of social cells, which we know was the first ideological principle of the bourgeois revolution.

So that in effect we rediscover here a constitutive feature of the reactionary mentality, which is to disperse the collectivity into individuals and the individual into essences. What the entire bourgeois theater does to psychological man, setting

Old against Young, Cuckold against Lover, Priest against Man of the World, the readers of *Le Figaro* do to the social being: to set striker against taxpayer is to constitute the world into a theater, to derive from the total man a special actor, and to oppose these arbitrary actors to each other in the lie of a symbolic structure which pretends to believe that the part is merely a perfect reduction of the whole.

This constitutes an example of a general technique of mystification which consists in formalizing the social disorder as much as possible. For example, the bourgeoisie is not concerned, it says, to know which side in a strike is right or wrong: having divided the effects the better to isolate the only one which concerns it, the bourgeoisie claims to have no interest in the cause: the strike is reduced to a solitary incident, to a phenomenon we avoid explaining the better to manifest its scandal. Similarly, the public services worker, the civil servant will be abstracted from the working mass, as if the entire salaried status of these workers were somehow drawn to, fixed at, and subsequently sublimated in the very surface of their functions. This prejudiced reduction of the social conditions makes it possible to dodge reality without abandoning the euphoric illusion of a direct causality which begins just where it is convenient for the bourgeoisie that it should: as the citizen suddenly finds himself reduced to the pure concept of the man in the street, so young draft-age Frenchmen wake up one morning sublimated into a pure military essence which will be virtuously taken for the *natural* point of departure of universal logic: military status thus becomes the unconditional origin of a new causality, which it will henceforth be monstrous to question: to contest this status can therefore in no case be the effect of a general and previous causality (the citizen's political consciousness) but only the product of accidents posterior to the operation of the new causal series: from the bourgeois point of view, a soldier's refusal to serve can only be the result



of agents or alcohol, as if there existed no other good reason for this action: a belief whose stupidity is exceeded only by its bad faith, since it is obvious that the contestation of a status can find its root and nourishment only in a consciousness which takes its distance with regard to that status.

We are dealing here with a new outbreak of essentialism. Hence it is logical that, in the face of the lies of essence and of party, the strike should posit the being and the truth of a totality. The strike signifies that man is total, that all his functions are connected with one another, that the roles of man in the street, taxpayer, and soldier are much too fragile to oppose the contagion of facts, and that in society all are concerned by all. By protesting that a strike is a disturbance to those it does not concern, the bourgeoisie testifies to a cohesion of social functions which it is the very goal of the strike to manifest: the paradox is that the petit bourgeois invokes the *naturalness* of his isolation at the very moment when the strike overwhelms him with the obviousness of his subordination.

## AFRICAN GRAMMAR

The official vocabulary of African affairs is, as we might suspect, purely axiomatic. Which is to say that it has no value as communication, but only as intimidation. It therefore constitutes a *writing*, i.e., a language intended to bring about a coincidence between norms and facts, and to give a cynical reality the guarantee of a noble morality. In a general way it is a language which functions essentially as a code, i.e., the words have no relation to their content, or else a contrary one. It is a writing we might call cosmetic, because it aims at covering the facts with a sound of language or, if we prefer, with the sufficient sign of language. I should like to indicate briefly the way in which a lexicon and a grammar can be politically committed.

**BAND** (of outlaws, rebels, or civil criminals). This is the very example of an axiomatic language. The disparagement of the vocabulary here serves in a precise way to deny the state of war, which permits annihilating the notion of an interlocutor. "No arguments with outlaws." The moralization of language thus permits referring the problem of peace to an arbitrary change of vocabulary.

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*In 1955, Morocco, then a French protectorate, was the scene of violent uprisings sparked by France's exile of Sultan Muhammad V and his replacement by the unpopular Muhammad Ben Arafat, whose reign was perceived as illegitimate. Violence in the Algerian War escalated that same year.*

When the "band" is French, it is sublimated under the name of *community*.

LACERATION (cruel, painful). This term helps accredit the notion of History's *irresponsibility*. The state of war is masked under the noble garment of tragedy, as if the conflict were essentially Evil, and not a (remediable) evil. Colonization evaporates, engulfed in the halo of an impotent lament, which *recognizes* the misfortune in order to establish it only the more successfully.

*Phraseology*: "The government of the Republic is resolved to make all possible efforts to bring to an end the cruel lacerations Morocco is suffering." (Letter from Monsieur Coty to Ben Arafa.)

". . . The Moroccan people, painfully divided against itself . . ." (Declaration by Ben Arafa.)

DISHONOR. We know that in ethnology, at least according to Lévi-Strauss's very suggestive hypothesis, *mana* is a kind of algebraic symbol, intended to represent "an indeterminate value of signification, in itself without meaning and therefore capable of receiving any meaning, whose unique function is to fill a gap between signifier and signified." *Honor* is quite specifically our *mana*, something like a blank place in which we arrange the entire collection of inadmissible meanings and which we make sacred in the manner of a taboo.

*Phraseology*: "It would be to dishonor the Muslim populations to let it be supposed that these men could be considered in France as their representatives. It would also be to dishonor France." (Communiqué of the Ministry of the Interior.)

DESTINY. It is at the very moment when, History testifying once again to its freedom, colonized peoples begin to deny the fatality of their condition that the bourgeois vocabulary

makes the greatest use of the word *destiny*. Like honor, destiny is a *mana* in which are modestly collected colonization's most sinister determinisms.

Naturally, Destiny exists only in a linked form. It is not military conquest which has subjected Algeria to France, it is a conjunction performed by Providence which has united two destinies. The link is declared indissoluble in the very period when it is dissolving with an explosiveness which cannot be concealed.

*Phraseology*: "We intend, as for ourselves, to give the peoples whose destiny is linked to ours a true independence within voluntary association." (Monsieur Pinay to the UN.)

GOD. Sublimated form of the French government.

*Phraseology*: "When the Omnipotent designated us to wield supreme power." (Declaration by Ben Arafa.)

". . . With the abnegation and the sovereign dignity of which you have always given the example . . . Your Majesty thus intends to obey the will of the Almighty." (Letter from Monsieur Coty to Ben Arafa, dismissed by the government.)

WAR. The goal is to deny the thing. For this, two means are available: either to name it as little as possible (most frequent procedure); or else to give it the meaning of its contrary (more cunning procedure, which is at the basis of almost all the mystifications of bourgeois discourse). *War* is then used in the sense of *peace*, and *pacification* in the sense of *war*.

*Phraseology*: "War does not keep measures of pacification from being taken." (General de Monsabert.) By which we are to understand that (official) peace does not, fortunately, prevent (real) war.

MISSION. This is the third *mana* word. Into it we can put whatever is wanted: schools, electricity, Coca-Cola, police operations,

raids, death sentences, concentration camps, freedom, civilization, and the "presence" of France.

*Phraseology:* "You know, however, that France has a mission in Africa which she alone can fulfill." (Monsieur Pinay to the UN.)

**POLITICS.** Assigned to a limited domain: on the one hand, there is France; and on the other, politics. North African affairs, when they concern France, are not within the domain of politics. When things become serious, abandon Politics for the Nation. For men of the Right, Politics is the Left: *they* are France.

*Phraseology:* "To seek to protect the French community and the virtues of France is not to engage in politics." (General Tricon-Dunois.)

In a contrary sense and bracketed with the word *conscience* (*politics of conscience*), the word *politics* becomes euphemistic; it then signifies a practical sense of spiritual realities, the nuance which permits a Christian to set out in good conscience to "pacify" Africa.

*Phraseology:* ". . . To refuse service a priori in an army imminently to serve in Africa, in order to avoid such a situation (to contradict an inhuman order), this abstract Tolstoyism cannot be identified with a politics of conscience, for it is no politics at all." (Dominican editorial in *La Vie intellectuelle*.)

**POPULATION.** This is a favorite word of the bourgeois vocabulary. It serves as an antidote to the excessively brutal *classes*, which, moreover, is "without reality." *Population* is meant to depoliticize the plurality of groups and minorities by pushing individuals back into a neutral, passive collection which is entitled to the bourgeois pantheon only on the level of a politically unconscious existence. The term is generally ennobled by its plural: *the Muslim populations*, which does not fail to sug-

gest a difference in maturity between the Metropolitan unity and the pluralism of the colonized, France *gathering* beneath her what is by nature diverse and numerous.

When it is necessary to make a disparaging judgment (war occasionally compels such severities), we readily fraction the population into elements. Elements are generally fanatic or manipulated. (For only fanaticism or unconsciousness can impel anyone to try to abandon colonized status.)

*Phraseology:* "The elements of the population which have been able to join the rebels under circumstances . . ." (Communiqué from the Ministry of the Interior.)

**SOCIAL.** *Social* is always bracketed with *economic*. This duo uniformly functions as an alibi, i.e., it announces or justifies on each occasion certain repressive operations, to the point where we might say that it signifies them. The social is essentially schools (France's civilizing mission, education of overseas peoples, gradually led to maturity); the economic is *interests*, always *obvious* and *reciprocal*, which *indissolubly* link Africa and Metropolitan France. These "progressive" terms, once suitably drained, can function with impunity as magical units.

*Phraseology:* "Social and economic domain, social and economic installations."

The predominance of substantives in the whole vocabulary of which we have just provided a few samples derives obviously from the huge consumption of concepts necessary to the cover-up of reality. Though general and advanced to the last degree of decomposition, the exhaustion of this language does not attack verbs and substantives in the same way: it destroys the verb and inflates the noun. Here moral inflation bears on neither objects nor actions, but always on ideas, "notions," whose assemblage obeys less a communication pur-

pose than the necessity of a petrified code. Codification of the official language and its substantiation thus go hand in hand, for the myth is fundamentally nominal, insofar as nomination is the first procedure of distraction.

The verb undergoes a curious legerdemain: if it is a main verb, we find it reduced to the state of a simple copula, meant simply to posit the existence or the quality of the myth. (Monsieur Pinay to the UN: "*There would be* an illusory détente . . . *it would be* inconceivable . . . *What would be* a nominal independence?" . . . etc.) The verb arduously attains full semantic status only on the level of the future, the possible, or the unintentional, in a remote distance where the myth runs less risk of being contradicted. (A Moroccan government *will be constituted* . . . *called upon to negotiate* reforms . . . the effort undertaken by France *with a view to constructing* a free association . . . etc.)

In this presentation, the substantive generally requires what two excellent grammarians, Damourette and Pichon, who lack neither rigor nor humor in their terminology, used to call the notorious plate, which means that the noun's substance is always presented to us as known. We are here at the very heart of the myth's formation: it is because France's *mission*, the *laceration* of the Moroccan people, or Algeria's *destiny* is given grammatically as a postulate (a quality generally conferred upon each by the use of the definite article) that we cannot contest them discursively. Notoriety is the first form of naturalization.

I have already observed the quite banal emphasis put on certain plural forms (*populations*). It must be added that this emphasis overvalues or depreciates at will certain intentions: *populations* installs a euphoric sentiment of pacifically subjugated multitudes; but when we speak of *elementary nationalisms*, the plural aims at degrading further, if it is possible, the

notion of (enemy) nationalism by reducing it to a collection of mediocre units. This is what our two grammarians, experts *avant la lettre* in African affairs, had further foreseen by distinguishing the *massive plural* from the *numerative plural*: in the first expression, the plural flatters an idea of mass; in the second, it insinuates an ideal of division. Thus grammar inflects the myth: it delegates its plurals to different moral tasks.

The adjective (or the adverb) often plays a curiously ambiguous role: it seems to proceed from an anxiety, from the sentiment that the substantives used, despite their notorious character, have undergone a wear and tear which cannot be entirely concealed; hence the necessity to reinvigorate them: independence becomes *true*, aspirations become *authentic*, destinies *indissolubly* linked. Here the adjective aims at clearing the noun of its past disappointments, presenting it in a new, innocent, credible state. As in the case of main verbs, the adjective confers a future value upon discourse. Past and present are the business of the substantives, great concepts in which the idea alone dispenses us from proof (Mission, Independence, Friendship, Cooperation, etc.); action and predicate, in order to be irrefutable, must take shelter behind some unreal form: finality, promise, or adjuration.

Unfortunately these adjectives of reinvigoration are worn out almost as fast as they are used, so that it is finally the adjectival relaunching of the myth which most certainly designates its inflation. It suffices to read *true*, *authentic*, *indissoluble*, or *unanimous* to get wind of the emptiness of the rhetoric. This is because at bottom these adjectives, which we might call adjectives of essence because they develop under a modal form the substance of the name they accompany—these adjectives cannot modify anything: independence cannot be anything but independent, friendship friendly, and cooperation unanimous. By the impotence of their effort, these

wretched adjectives here come to manifest the ultimate health of language. Try as the official rhetoric will to reinforce the facades of reality, there is a moment when the words resist it and oblige it to reveal beneath the myth the alternative of lie or truth: independence is or is not, and all the adjectival designs which strive to give nothingness the qualities of being are the very signature of culpability.

## NEITHER/NOR CRITICISM

In one of the first issues of the daily edition of *L'Express* can be read a profession of faith by an (anonymous) critic who produced a fine piece of balanced rhetoric asserting that criticism must be "neither a parlor game nor a municipal service"—i.e., neither reactionary nor Communist, neither gratuitous nor political.

Here is a mechanism of double exclusion largely deriving from that numerical frenzy which we have already encountered several times and which I thought might be broadly defined as a petit bourgeois feature: various methods would be reckoned as if on a scale, heaped in one pan or the other as one thought best, so as to appear, oneself, an unpersuadable arbiter endowed with an ideal, and thereby *just*, spirituality—like the beam which judges the scale's weighing process.

The tares necessary to such an accountancy are formed by the morality of the terms employed. According to an old terrorist procedure (there is no escaping terrorism), one judges with the same breath with which one names, and the word, ballasted by a prior culpability, comes quite naturally to weigh down one of the pans of the scale. For instance, say *culture* were to be opposed to *ideologies*. Culture is a noble, universal good, situated beyond social prejudices: culture has no weight. Ideologies, though, are partisan inventions: so, let the scales judge! One sets them back to back under culture's severe gaze