

In *Mythologies*, Barthes analyzes myth as he reads it operating in France in the 1950s. Analyze an instance of contemporary myth-making. Has myth(ology) changed? Have the mythologist's tools changed in the last half-century?

Myth is a mode of communication, a form of (mythical) signification, 'a type of speech'¹. It is a message of naturalized ideology channeled through collective representation like 'newspaper, art and common sense'² and through meta-language. It shares the nature of spectacle, highly-encoded. Mythology, is a science of reading that involves ideological critique bearing on the language of mass culture, and semiological analysis of the mechanics of this language³. Barthes' analysis on myths aims at exposing the mechanism of false beliefs, of ideological abuse. He wants to know how this mechanism mediates social problematic and how myth-consumers and mythologists interact with it.

Mythologist's Tools

As implicitly depicted in 'Myth Today', a mythologist's most basic tool is *estrangement*. 'The mythologist cuts himself off from all the myth-consumers... is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality; for him, to be in society is, at best, to be truthful: his utmost sociality dwells in his utmost morality His connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm.'⁴ A mythologist remains an outsider, an observer of myth-consumers, and the mythical world where *reality* is always excessively spoken. Being on the margin is a powerful 'tool' for a mythologist because it is indeed *in* alienation that he is closest to reality. If he can understand this necessary alienation, and locate himself in the milieu between an object and its demystification, between powerless and wholeness, he would decipher the mediated representation of the object – yet not only by penetrating and liberating it, but by acknowledging its full weight, respecting it, and restoring it to a state which is still mystified – he may be still excluded from the society, but is nonetheless closer to his goal: 'a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and

explanation, between object and knowledge.⁵ Certainly, mythology is a science of reading, hence a mythologist needs to be equipped, above all, with *reading skills*⁶. 'For language is never innocent: words have a second order memory which mysteriously persists in the midst of new meanings'⁷, the mythologist does his job by studying the linguistic and graphic connotation of seemingly normal representations and looks for 'new meanings'.

To be honest, everyone can be a mythologist if he is critical enough and pays attention to details in life since everything can be a material of myth for 'the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions'⁸. In the following reading, I am positioning myself not exactly in an outsider's shoes because I feel there is no way to be completely alienated from the masses – to do that will be creating an Otherness. I would study my object, not on a purely theoretical ground but in terms of its signification and socio-political conditions.

Contemporary myth-making

Myth, other than defined by Barthes in his semiological and ideological ways, can be literally interpreted as 'make believe', and I have to say that Hong Kong is an expert in such art. Hong Kong, as analyzed in many post-colonial discourses, is a city that is constantly searching for its own identity despite its 'non-nation' status, and this issue has been discussed with urgency more than ever after the 1997 sovereignty handover. In 'Wine and Milk', Barthes suggests that wine-drinking is first of all, a representation of Frenchness – 'Wine is felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own, just like its three hundred and sixty types of cheese or its culture.'⁹ The second, denotative meaning of wine is a sense of binding, of social integration – wine is being served to bind the French men and women together in amity and give them a sense of themselves as one nation. The Hong Kong government is wishing to find something that can, like French wine, establish a sense of togetherness *for* its people. They came up with the idea of building a large-scaled central cluster of art, culture, entertainment and leisure – a *landmark* that would not only give Hong Kong people an identity, but would show the world what Hong Kong is made of.



“West Kowloon Cultural District: An Icon for Culture and Leisure”¹⁰

Probably because the economy has restored to a comfortable level from the 1997 Asia Economy Crisis, in late 1998, the Hong Kong government decided it was time for its people to take a break from their busy urban lives and take a dip in ‘Culture and Leisure’. They proposed a very ambitious project – West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) and their press release reads: ‘The WKCD will be a landmark development that enhances Hong Kong's position as a world city of culture. The new cultural district will bring together a vibrant mix of performing and visual arts. The will be both a showpiece for urban design and a meeting point for the local and international arts communities...’¹¹ What is a landmark? What makes something a landmark? How is a landmark formed? When asked, the government officials use the examples of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Sydney Opera House in Sydney, Big Ben and the House of Parliament in London etc. ‘to answer’ the questions. There is one simple answer in their minds – the more impressive you make something looks like, it will become a landmark as in a common Chinese saying ‘The Bigger the Better’. One will be definitely impressed when looking at the numerical figures in the government’s ‘basic requirements’ for the developers who are interested in handing in proposals for the WKCD project:

The core facilities

- * Three theatres with at least 2,000, 800 and 400 seats respectively;
- * A performance venue with at least 10,000 seats;
- * A cluster of four museums at least 75,000 square metres in size;

- * An art exhibition centre at least 10,000 square metres in size;
- * A water amphitheatre;
- * At least four piazzas; and
- * A canopy covering at least 55% of the development area.

And one will be further amazed when hearing the sweet promises that the government is making:

the WKCD will:

- * Enrich our cultural life by attracting internationally acclaimed performances and exhibitions;
- * Nurture local arts talent and create more opportunities for arts groups;
- * Enhance international cultural exchange;
- * Put Hong Kong on the world arts and culture map;
- * Provide state-of-the-art performance venues and museums;
- * Offer more choices to arts patrons;
- * Encourage creativity;
- * Enhance our harbour front;
- * Attract overseas visitors; and
- * Create jobs.

The whole idea and image packaging of WKCD is a myth. A larger-than-life myth. Some of the most financially powerful developers claim in their proposals that they have got in touch with some international, presentational big names like the Louvre and the Centre de Pompidou in France, Guggenheim Museum and MOMA in USA to have their 'second branch' opened in WKCD. Like the government officials, these developers obviously do not know and have never studied the meaning of 'landmark'. Those museums and institutions are themselves landmarks of their respective countries (France is not only 'made with' the Eiffel Tower), how can a landmark be so easily transplanted to a foreign land with complete different historical and cultural context? By common sense, of course sure a massive and expensive architectural construct with such 'groundbreaking' international vision in art and culture would make itself noticed in the world, but in what ways? Again, by common sense, we know it is not possible to build Rome overnight –

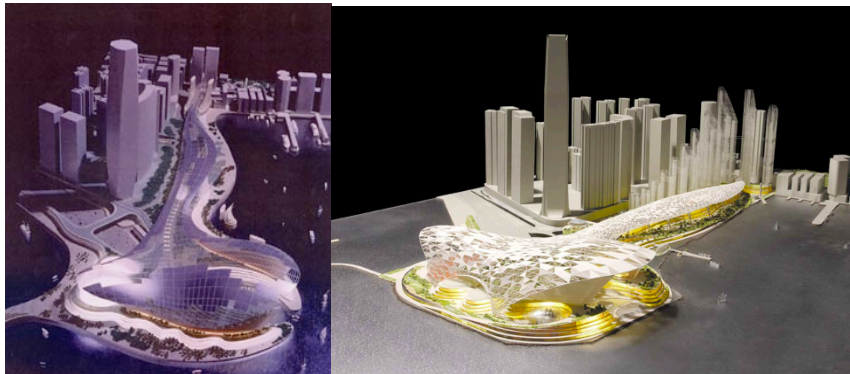
how can a landmark be a landmark with merely a steel shell and no content unique of its own?

What the government needs to do, apart from allowing themselves to be bewildered in the futuristic fantasy, is to first of all, take advantage of the unique hybrid nature of Hong Kong as a geographically and historically art concept, and to develop local talent. Certainly, a government's initiative is indispensable in the forming of culture, however culture as well as art, is not a rigid artificial construct, but one that is formed through history and the power of the public – artists, art organizations and people. Hong Kong cultural industries have always been loosely organized and unified, some of the few existing art clusters are the Cattle Depot Artist Village (formerly known as Oil Street), and Para/Site, other than those two, many unnamable independent art organizations are scattered around the territory because of insufficient funding from the government. Rent is incredibly expensive in Hong Kong making it very difficult for the organizations even to get a simple office or workshop. Creating the hardware first and fitting things in next is a total inversion of the way art and culture is nurtured, both the government and the developers are working from the other way round in assuming and believing that people will naturally *know* how to enjoy various cultural activities when a venue for such activities to happen is provided. WKCD is a myth, pretends not to be one by wrapping itself up in numbers and figures which are meaningless signs. To a mythologist, this big myth may not even be 'challenging' in a sense that both its denotational and connotational messages, though pretend to be some serious statements, are really just jokes, they do not even need to be decoded. However precisely because of the thought of 'jokes' at that split second, we know myth is at work. Knowledge and time do not help to reinforce nor destroy myths, even though we think a certain idea is rubbish, we would still be impressed by its glorious image and believe it for just that one second, this is because myth tolerates and sustains contradictions.

Canopy: a gigantic sign

I shall now proceed to another reading of signification in the myth that I have chosen. Among other core facilities the government has included in the project requirements is

'A canopy covering at least 55% of the development area', The canopy concept is an integral and indispensable part of Norman Foster's scheme, the first-prize winning entry of the WKCD Concept Plan Competition in February 2002. Without much explanation as of why they decide to adopt this design, the government simply says 'A grand canopy, providing shade and shelter for the facilities below, will make the complex a new Hong Kong icon. With its sinuously flowing form (this feature was chosen as winner of the competition)'¹²



Like 'landmark', the problematic word 'icon' is used to describe the canopy. On the first level of reading¹³, if I take the canopy as an empty signifier and let the concept fill the form of myth, I would get a straight-forward meaning of the canopy-icon signification: the canopy denotes and symbolizes the international metropolitan status of Hong Kong, as it were. On the second level, if I focus on a full signifier and distinguish the binary between the meaning and the form, think again, (this time taking into consideration the estimated cost of the canopy which is between \$2.5 billion and \$4 billion): the canopy becomes a dressed-up representation (connotation) of the international metropolitan status of Hong Kong. It is a distorted and untrue image, now deciphered by me, the mythologist. Lastly, on the third level of reading, if I focus on the mythical signifier as a unity made of meaning and form, I will see an ambiguous dynamics of myth: the canopy is not a simple denotation nor connotation, but it is, as Barthes says, 'the very presence' of Hong Kong international metropolitan-ness. The 'make believe' happens as 'the reader lives myth as a story at once true and unreal' due to the capacity of myth that can transform history as well as fantasy I would say, into nature.

Going back to the myth-making of WKCD as a whole, I would like to point out a political aspect of such myth. There has been a lot of talk about government-corporate conspiracy, the government has claimed that its task is *only* providing a piece of reclamation land, and monitoring, not directly funding, the project. But bear in mind that we are talking about a 40-hectare waterfront site with an estimated value of \$100-\$165 billion dollars, and the final successful developer who gets the deal is actually getting the right to control the property market in that area for the next fifty years as the government has put a 'limit' of fifty years of management under the developer. Corruption and 'transportation of interest' between the government and various corporates is not something new. What I am concerned is the way the government-salesmen are portraying the WKCD as humanistic, people-oriented, educational project that aims to construct a landmark *for* Hong Kong. In some ways, Hong Kong artists are 'dispossessed' like the Muslims being dispossessed in Barthes's observation in 'Wine and Milk'. An intend-to-be communal and inspiring art and culture project has turned into a property development project under the 'uninvolved' attitude of the government whose aim is to allow private sections in the society to take up responsibility in building infrastructures that are beneficial to the citizens, in a 'sophisticated' way. It is indeed an ideological representation of a working capitalism, of the way a modern society registers and executes its policies – with nothing but economy on their blueprints.

Has mythology changed?

I would say mythology has become economy-orientated as different from politics-orientated during Barthes's era. In 'To Read the World: Barthes's *Mythologies* Thrity years Later', Peter Fitting re-states the 'original dual focus of *Mythologies*' to re-politicize the often de-politized Barthesian theoretical model. It is true that Barthes's early writings on mythology is always occupied with certain Marxist concepts, that he managed to read every text in its political consideration like from the French's love of wine to their national identity to French capitalistic exploitation of the wine producing countries. This political orientation may have changed as in modern days capitalism is dominant in almost all countries, as in my case study of WKCD, economic interest (for Hong Kong, for the

government and the developers) is a major issue. Nevertheless, economy can be categorized under the meta-language of politics, and in that way, the *basic* orientation in the mythology is still politics. On a whole, what Barthes did in his work was to give an ideological and semiological framework to all kind of cultural analysis. He suggested not only unmasking representation and revealing the false naturalness of things, further to that, he suggested, in his later career (1970s onwards, deliberated by 'From Work to Text' and 'Change of Object Itself') that we should destroy the sign.

'... it is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked... it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols but to challenge the symbolic itself...In an initial moment, the aim [of semiology] was the destruction of the (ideological) signified; in a second, it is that of the destruction of the sign.'¹⁴

It seems to me however, Barthes's manifesto is theoretical, almost formalistic, rather than practical. The modification from mythology to idiolectology displaces the binaries without diminishing any actual 'effects' of false consciousness, what I meant to say is even Barthes regarded mythology, later semiology, critical decipherment as well as evaluation of popular culture, it does not appear to be particularly 'useful'. Turning to newer, subversive sign at the same time returning to the previous signs – the continuous change of signs always remain problematic. Yet, I have learnt from studying Barthes's work some kind of technique in writing social critique, and successfully or not, I have attempted to apply this technique in the essay.

Notes

- 1 Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, p.109
- 2 Barthes, 1970 preface to *Mythologies*, p.9-11
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Barthes, 'Myth Today', p.156-157
- 5 Barthes, 'Myth Today', p.158
- 6 Barthes lists out three different schemas of reading on page 128 of 'Myth Today' that sums up my crude coining of the term *reading skills*
- 7 Barthes, 'Writing Degree Zero', in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, p.37
- 8 Barthes, 'Myth Today', p.109
- 9 Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.58
- 10 This picture and other pictures in this essay are all from Hong Kong Administrative Special Region (official government website), so it the slogan I have quoted here. <http://www.hplb.gov.hk/wkcd/eng/main.htm> (Accessed 25 April 2005).
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Here I am trying to apply Barthes's three schemas of reading as in 'Myth Today'
- 14 Roland Barthes, 'Change of Object Itself', first published in *Esprit*, 1972

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