MYTH TODAY

By Roland Barthes

Myth is a type of speech

Barthes says that myth is a type of speech but not any type of ordinary speech. A day-to-day speech, concerning our daily needs cannot be termed as myth. Language needs special conditions in order to become myth. At some point of time in history an object, a picture, a condition or a statement may become a myth, if it means something. Thus Barthes makes a point that myth is a system of communication; it is a message, signified. As it signifies something it is a mode of signification.

According to him everything can be a myth if it is conveyed by a discourse. He says;

“Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society…” Myth is a social usage built upon a pure matter. Here Barthes gives example of tree as an image; apart from being an ordinary tree, some people may bring it to mean more than a tree: a revolt image or an image of God etc.

According to Barthes every discourse- conveying thing is a myth; it is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech.

Nature of Myth:

Myth is not defined by its object or by its material, but by the way in which it utters this message. Formation of myths goes on forever. Some objects become the subject of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear, others take their place and attain the status of myth. Myths are grounded in history or in the time of their production, they do not evolve from the nature of things.

While dealing with myths one does not deal with representation but with signification. That is why Mythical speech cannot be treated like language. Myths in fact belong to the province of a general science, coextensive with linguistics, which is semiology.
Myth as a semiological system:

Semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content. A verbal message can be analyzed by linguist, as he has only to make clear the denotative relationship between signifier and signified. But myths signify connotative meaning, (implied/suggested) which is grounded in history. In a way it is an extension of the regular meaning (denotation). Here we do not have the regular relationship of signifier and the signified.

For Barthes myths ancient or modern signify more than it meets the eye( ). This can be studied by this vast science of signs which Saussure termed as semiology. Barthes admits that Semiology has not yet come into being, but if we use with limits set to it, it is not a metaphysical trap: it is a science among others, necessary but not sufficient. Myths are ideas-in-form.

While analyzing a myth one encounters the tri dimensional pattern of language signifier, signified and the sign. To explain it, Barthes gives an example of “a bunch of Roses” : Roses functioning as signifier may signify passions. Here signifier and the signified as concepts, exited separately, they had no relation as such, but after coming together both; Roses and Passions come to signify, Roses standing for Passions (sign). Passions get loaded on roses and make a sign. Roses could have been given any other significance. That is why Barthes says; “signifier is empty, the sign is full...”. This distinction has a capital importance for the study of myth as semiological schema. Barthes agrees with Saussurean view of the terms: the signifier is the acoustic image, where as signified is the concept and the relationship between image and concept is the sign.

Myths are constructed from the existing material/semiological chain, But they signify a different meaning, that is why Barthes calls it as “second-order semiological system”: The sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. The language, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc. however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth.
As per Barthes theory in myth there are two semiological systems;

1) Linguistic system : Barthes calls it; *language-object*, in this system signifier and the signified are in regular relationship.
2) Myth system: Barthes calls it *Metalanguage*. This system gets hold of the ‘Language-object’ system and builds its own signification.

The Metalanguage encroaches upon the language- object, and uses it for its own purpose. In order to explain the complexity Barthes gives two examples first he takes a statement for analysis;

*because my name is lion*

There are two semiological systems into the statement. At one level the statement talks only about the name of a person. But at the second level it starts signifying the imposing qualities of lion into the speaker.

- *(I am a grammatical example)* much more than by its literal sense *(my name is lion)*;

In second example Barthes refers to cover page picture of a magazine. In this picture a young Negro in a French uniform with uplifted eyes, is saluting the national flag.
- At linguistic/language-object level: The meaning is a Negro boy is saluting the national flag.

- At Myth/metalanguage level: At this level the sign provided by the language-object system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*) becomes the signifier in the myth, signifying that the France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag. Blacks have been oriented such that they have been saluting the French flag. French imperiality is established.

If myth is a system of communication/signification, coextensive with the linguistic system; exactly what happens between the two systems can be understood when Barthes explains the terms in Mythical system.

The signifier in the myth system is the final term of linguistic system (sign). Barthes terms it as Meaning, and at mythical system he calls the signifier as form. As for the signified he calls it Concept.

Linguistic System: Signifier + Signified = Sign

(Meaning)

Mythical System: Signifier + signified = Signification

(Form)

Myth has a double function 1) it points out 2) it makes us understand something and even imposes it on us.
The form and the concept:

Form:

Barthes says, the signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: As myth encroaches upon linguistic system and creates its own meaning. Because of this encroachment the signifier at mythical level is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other. As meaning, the signifier already postulates a reading, there is richness in it: the naming of the lion, the Negro's salute are credible wholes, they have at their disposal a sufficient rationality. The meaning is already complete; it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, and decisions.

When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates; the totality of the meaning is gone and only the letters remain. There we see a shift; a linguistic sign turns into a mythical signifier, sign (meaning) becomes a signifier (Form). Thus in a way Form is a parasite building itself upon the meaning part (sign) of linguistic system.

The form puts away all the richness at a distance: and the Form calls for a signification to fill it.

But the essential point in all this is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history. Above all, it must be able to hide there. It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. The form of myth is not a symbol: the Negro who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence; he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, indisputable image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperially: once made use of, it becomes artificial.
**Concept (signified):** the history which goes out of the form will be wholly absorbed by the concept. The concept is at once historical and intentional; it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered.

Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth. In mythical concept there is less reality than certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept.

In this sense, we can say that the **fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated:**

A signified can have several signifiers: this is indeed the case in linguistics. It is also the case in the mythical concept: it has at its disposal an unlimited mass of signifiers: Here Barthes says that, a number of signifiers can represent French imperialism.

Thus the form is quantitatively rich whereas concept is qualitatively (number/multiplicity) rich. So, both are poor in something and rich in another. This repetition of the concept through different forms is precious to the mythologist; it allows him to decipher the myth:

**Temporaneity of mythical concept:**

Here Barthes notes that, there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they are considerably temporary; they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, and disappear completely. And it is precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them. This instability forces the mythologist to use a terminology adapted to it, and about which I should now like to say a word,

**The signification**

In semiology, the third term is nothing but the association of the first two, as we saw. Barthes calls it: the signification. The signification is the myth itself. By distorting the linguistic meaning myth builds its own meaning. Just as for Freud the manifest meaning of behavior is distorted by its latent meaning, in myth the meaning is distorted by the concept. In a simple system like the language, the signified cannot distort anything at all because the signifier, being empty, arbitrary, offers no resistance to it.
Myth is a double system; there occurs in it a sort of ubiquity: The signification of the myth happens because of the constant shift of meaning to form and vice-versa. This game of hide and seek goes on in the concept, which makes use of the ambiguous signifier which is at once intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural.

Myth is a value, truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi: it is enough that its signifier has two sides for it always to have an 'elsewhere' at its disposal. The meaning is always there to present the form; the form is always there to outdistance the meaning. And there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place. In the same way, if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparency of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full. The same thing occurs in the mythical signifier: its form is empty but present; it’s meaning absent but full.

**And it is again this duplicity of the signifier which determines the characters of the signification.** We now know that myth is a type of speech defined by its intention (*I am a grammatical example*) much more than by its literal sense.

Myth has an imperative, buttonholing character. It has an intentional and imperative force.

The mythical speech is political at the same time a frozen speech; it assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens; it makes itself look neutral and innocent. The appropriation of the concept is suddenly driven away once more by the literalness of the meaning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal meaning/linguistic meaning</th>
<th>Appropriated meaning /myth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negro as devout French Citizen saluting the flag</td>
<td>French imperially is condemning the Negro/ laughing at him</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The literal meaning is used as a base upon which the myth makes its process of signification. An intentional meaning is played upon the literal one. Barthes calls myth a “*stolen and restored*” speech.
Signification has its motivation. The sign in a language system is arbitrary, there is no relationship between the signifier and the concept; nothing compels the acoustic image tree 'naturally' to mean the concept tree: the sign, here, is unmotivated.

The mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy; for French imperialism to get hold of the saluting Negro there must be identity between the Negro's salute and that of the French soldier. Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form; there is no myth without motivated form.

**Reading and deciphering myth:**

In order to answer the question as to how is a myth received? Barthes gives three different types of reading.

I. If one focuses on an empty signifier, the concept is invited to fill the form of the myth without ambiguity. This is a simple kind of reading where the signification becomes literal again: the Negro who salutes is an *example* of French imperialism, he is a *symbol* for it. This type of focusing is, that of the producer of myths, of the journalist who starts with a concept and seeks a form for it.

2. If one focuses on a full signifier, one brings into play the game of meaning and the form, and consequently the distortion which the one imposes on the other. In this kind of reading one understands the distortion and receives the form as the imposture: the saluting Negro becomes the *alibi* of French imperialism. This type reading is that of the mythologist: he deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion.

3. Finally, if one focuses on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, one receives an ambiguous signification: This is the reading which a reader does. The saluting Negro is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very *presence* of French imperialism.

The first two types of focusing are static, analytical; they destroy the myth, either by making its intention obvious, or by unmasking it: the former is cynical, the latter demystifying. The third type of focusing is dynamic; it consumes the myth according to
the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal.

Myth is not as simple as it is shown in the first two readings. Barthes says; “**Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts...**” and makes it look natural. Myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden but because they are naturalized. In fact, what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. The signifier and the signified, in his eyes share a natural relationship.

**Myth as stolen language**

In myth **form** takes the place of **meaning**. Myth system encroaches upon the linguistic system; Barthes calls it **“a language-robbery”**. Thus myth is a stolen language. Articulated language, which is most often robbed by myth, offers little resistance. It contains in itself some mythical dispositions; the meaning can almost always be **interpreted**. Language offers to myth an open-work meaning. Myth can easily insinuate itself into it, and swell there: it is a robbery by colonization.

Barthes says nothing can be safe from myth. Myth can reach everything, corrupt everything, whoever here resists completely yields completely.

The language of Mathematics is full with meaning, which cannot be distorted or altered, so myth carries it in toto/ as it is. It takes a certain mathematical formula, e.g. \( E = mc^2 \), and makes of this unalterable meaning the pure signifier of mathematicity. This formula does not signify the total of the letters but the mathematicity.

Our traditional Literature is an undoubtedly a mythical system: The traditional, classical literary pieces together make themselves as the signifier, signifying a discourse, a literary discourse.

Barthes says; **the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn**, and to produce an **artificial myth**: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth.
**Myth is depoliticized speech:**

Myth while entering the common usage, leaves aside the historical contingency, and comes in the guise of naturalness: As if a conjuring trick takes place history goes out and nature takes its place. In the picture of Saluting Negro what got depoliticized is the history of colonialism. Myth makes the things look innocent. It gives them a natural and eternal justification; it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. All the dialectic of the past gets forgotten, the political load looks neutral, and everything seems to be quite normal which describes the present reality.

As Marx had said that most of the things are ideological; Barthes says most of the myths are politically full with intention.

Barthes through this groundbreaking essay wants to say that, the whole culture as well as literature is full with mythical situations or bourgeoisie ethos that is why as an aware reader or mythologist one must be conscious about the duplicity of its signification.