

Laura Krasovska
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Roland Barthes: Analysis of the Concept of Identification in Nowadays Media

In his work, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes is concerned to analyze the “myths” circulating in contemporary society, the false representations and misguided beliefs. He imposed that there are different meanings of different things that surround us in our everyday life. According to Barthes, some stereotypes, supplementary meanings or connotations can arise if one looks only at the surface of some issue. This reveals that there are secondary meanings as well. In this sense, the word “myth” can also mean artificial, arguable or unreal thing and it is a hidden construction which passes itself off as natural. “Myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion.”

(Barthes) Barthes believes that what we accept as being “natural” is in fact a seeming reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power actualizing in society, which is considered as *petit bourgeoisie*. Barthes highlights one of its principal figures –the identification, stating that

The *petit bourgeois* is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the *petit-bourgeois* universe, all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. The spectacle and the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors. (Barthes)

This idea of *bourgeoisie* and one of its principal figures, such as “identification”, can be supported by recent, modern world examples of mass media.

To reconsider Barthes' statement in other words, the Other in nowadays media is presented in such a way that mostly the society do not grapple with or even recognize fully their presence. One example can be media's portrayal of homosexuals. In the popular TV show "Sex and The City" homosexual characters are presented as good friends of heterosexuals. The "gap" or difference between them is minimized to the extent that they attend the same parties, have equal conditions of job opportunities, equal fashion taste and equal status in conversations about the nowadays liberal sexuality etc. This confirms the above mentioned notion that the "otherness" is reduced to "sameness". However homosexuals are not the main characters of the discussion and this implies the marginality, in other words, the bourgeoisie's partial incapability to imagine the Other. More over, there are a variety of ways that the media affects and tracks the attitudes that the public has toward homosexuals. Examples include dissemination of information, both accurate and inaccurate, television shows, and public opinion polls. A place where homosexuals have not been silenced, but actually encouraged to tell all is in the increasingly popular medium of daytime talk shows. Talk show hosts encourage public discussions, on-camera fights and vivid descriptions of those whose identities differ from the norm. According to Barthes, the Other in this case is presented as something exotic: "The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home" (Barthes). All this increases talk show ratings and makes more money for the producers of the show, and they do succeed where others have failed by giving voice to those who are otherwise systematically silenced. This represents the contemporary "liberalism" practiced by the petit-bourgeoisie described by Barthes.

Another example of the identification can be observed in the myth or stereotype about Muslims. There have been countless assumptions that Arabs are Muslims, and vice versa, not taking into account that the largest Muslim country is Indonesia, which is not Arab. According to the media coverage, all of them are presented as terrorists, for example, because of the terrorist attack on 9/11, which was conducted by Al Qaeda, the Arabs. As “Others”, they are indicated as “scandal, which threatens his [bourgeois’s] essence.” (Barthes) Thanks to stereotypes, already long established by Hollywood movies and TV programs for young and old, people have seen belly dancers, greedy oil billionaires and bombers, camel jockeys etc. The Walt Disney movie Aladdin’s opening lyrics were: “I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face. It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” (Wikipedia) In this example, Barthes’ statement of identification even develops to the level when “(...) even if he [the bourgeois] is unable to experience the Other in himself, the bourgeois can at least imagine the place where he [the Other] fits in: this is what is known as liberalism, which is a sort of intellectual equilibrium based on recognized places.” (Barthes)

Roland Barthes has looked at the way how the media construct myths and the language of understanding. According to the examples, it is observable that a mass culture which Barthes sees as controlled by petit-bourgeoisie constructs this mythological reality and encourages conformity to its own values using one of its principal figures “identification”. The relationship between “us” and “the Other” is clearly observable in nowadays media. This, however, proves that people act on their interpretations and their knowledge of reality, which supports the explanations of how the myths survive today and how they are uncovered in order to create the understanding of the perceived reality.

Works Cited

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