

Myths, Icons, Sacred Symbols and Semiotics



**Roland Barthes and Structuralism as a Tool
for Understanding Global Culture**

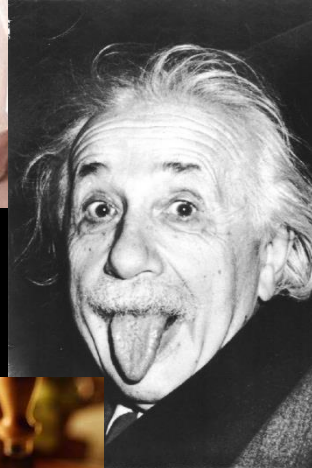
Roland Barthes → Mythologies (1915-1980)

- **French** literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. Post-WWII Paris France.
- 1950s: Series of essays in the magazine **Les Lettres Nouvelles** → Barthes began decoding myths, icons, trends of popular mainstream culture.
 - Influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss (creators of the disciplines of Linguistics and Semiotics)
- **VT connection:** 1957 Taught at Middlebury College.
- **Book:** Mythologies (1957) a full collection of his essays on popular iconic culture. Translated worldwide.
 - Barthes examines “the tendency of contemporary social value systems to fabricate/create **modern myths about itself and its people and the important prioritized cultural values.**
 - Barthes looks at the **process of myth creation** → and the people or organizations that are involved.



Roland Barthes → **2nd Level Semiotics**

- **2nd Level Semiotics** → people, objects, organizations, designs are **ELEVATED** to the level of mainstream symbolic **ICONS** or **MYTHIC** figures through media and cultural repetition.
- Semiotic ICON/Myth analysis is a key foundation of **cultural studies** and **STRUCTURALISM** (sociology, anthro, social sciences).
 - Structuralism**. Every social system has a structured order of signs/symbols which we use to derive individual identities, meaning and relationships.
 - Cultural Niches or sub-cultures | **MARKETING**
 - Agenda Setting POWER**. Whoever controls “meaning-making” structures or “norming” processes also tends to have true **POWER** in our society. **SYMBOLIC** → **economic** → **political POWER**



The RISE of SOFT POWER

1950s-60s: The Culture Industries ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

- ▶ **SOFT POWER** = MEDIA products and services. Areas associated with ENTERTAINMENT and Leisure.
- ▶ **Hard POWER** = Political Forces (Laws, Courts, Governments, Military, Police, etc.)

1. RAPID RISE of Mass Media and The “CULTURE INDUSTRIES” →

- ▶ Music
- ▶ Fashion
- ▶ Celebrity
- ▶ Fads/Trends
- ▶ Popular books/fiction
- ▶ Magazines
- ▶ Movies
- ▶ Sports
- ▶ Video Games
- ▶ Food



2. **MEDIA STUDIES** as an **INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCIPLINE** (both the Technologies AND Techniques) Anthro, Soc, Bus, Econ, Psych, Health, Environment

3. **MEDIA RESEARCH: AUDIENCE Behaviors, Trends, Enculturation, Education,** and Identities (Mass and individuals)

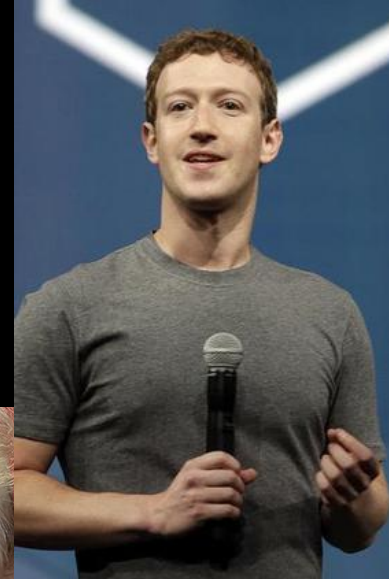
4. The “**ENGINEERING**” of people, behaviors, markets & POPULAR CULTURE



Celebrity POWER (Social, Political, Economic, “Spiritual”)



Poltical & Economic Power

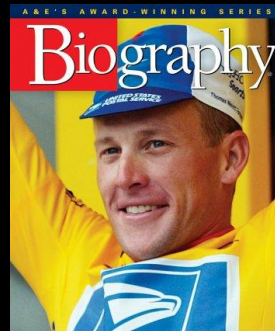


Global Transnational Corporate Logos

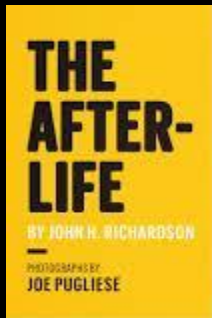


Manufacturing/Engineering Iconic Figures

- Systematic
- Media scaffolding
- Media mgt.



Lance Armstrong
Racing for His Life



Lance Armstrong
7-Time Tour de France
Champion

Magazines, Repetition, & Propaganda: Manufacturing an Icon



When does the “engineering” of icons, stories, and practices turn into **cultural imperialism**?

- **Definition of Cultural Imperialism:**

- The imposition by one usually politically or economically dominant community of various aspects of its own culture onto another, nondominant community. It is a form of imperialism in that the imposing community forcefully extends the authority of its “way of life” or mainstream norms over the other population by either transforming or replacing aspects of the nondominant community’s culture.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQMp-0tU7qk>