



Dr Kalyani Vallath speaks on

Structuralism

An Introduction

What is Structuralism?

- ✦ A French movement of the 1950s closely associated with Russian Formalism, Prague School and Polish Structuralism (itself based on Stylistics)
- ✦ A departure from Humanism
 - ✦ Concerned with the underlying relations constituting language and all symbolic systems
- ✦ A way of thinking about the world predominantly concerned with the perceptions & description of structures
- ✦ Claims that the nature of every entity in any situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by all the other entities involved in that situation

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What is Structuralism?

- ✦ Nothing can be understood in isolation
- ✦ Full significance of any entity cannot be perceived unless and until it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part
- ✦ Contexts of larger structures do not exist by themselves. These are formed by our way of perceiving the world.
 - ✦ Meaning is attributed
 - ✦ All human activity is constructed (not natural or “essential”)

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Major Figures

- ✦ Ferdinand de Saussure
- ✦ Claude Lévi-Strauss
- ✦ Roland Barthes
- ✦ A. J. Greimas
- ✦ Jonathan Culler
- ✦ Roman Jakobson
- ✦ Vladimir Propp
- ✦ Terence Hawkes
- ✦ Gerard Genette
- ✦ Jean Piaget
- ✦ Louis Althusser

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Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

- ✦ Roots of Structuralism
 - ✦ Lectures and theories of early 20th century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the University of Geneva
- ✦ Course in General Linguistics (1916)
 - ✦ Published posthumously from lecture notes in 1916 by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye
- ✦ The object of linguistics is not language, but LANGUE and PAROLE
 - ✦ Language exists beyond speech, beyond the individual, beyond things
 - ✦ Move away from historical study of language to structures, functions
 - ✦ Laid the foundations of Semiotics

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Structuralism as a philosophical stance

- ✦ Structuralists are interested in the interrelationship between
 - ✦ **UNITS** (also called "surface phenomena")
 - ✦ **RULES** (the ways that units can be put together)
- ✦ In language
 - ✦ Units are words and the rules are the forms of grammar which order words
 - ✦ In different languages, the grammar rules are different, as are the words, but the structure is still the same in all languages: words are put together within a grammatical system to make meaning.

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An Example

Cinderella

Characters: princess, stepmother, prince

Plotline: a princess is persecuted by a stepmother and rescued (and married) by a prince

Units: princess, stepmother, and prince

Rules: stepmothers are evil, princesses are victims, and princes and princesses have to marry.

Structuralist analyses of literature identify such underlying structures

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Structuralist notions on units and rules

- ✦ Structuralists believe that the underlying structures which organize units and rules into meaningful systems are generated by the human mind itself, and not by sense perception.
- ✦ As such, the mind is itself a structuring mechanism which looks through units and files them according to rules.
- ✦ So structuralism sees itself as a science of humankind, and works to uncover all the structures that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel

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These structures are universal

- ✦ Every human mind in every culture at every point in history has used some sort of structuring principle to organize and understand cultural phenomena.
- ✦ Every human culture has some sort of language, which has the basic structure of all languages: words/ phonemes are combined according to a grammar of rules to produce meaning.
- ✦ Every human culture similarly has some sort of social organization
- ✦ All of these organizations are governed, according to structuralist analyses, by structures which are universal.

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Properties of a Structure

- ✦ **Wholeness.** This means that the system functions as a whole, not just as a collection of independent parts.
- ✦ **Transformation.** This means that the system is not static, but capable of change. New units can enter the system, but when they do they're governed by the rules of the system.
- ✦ **Self-Regulation.** This is related to the idea of transformation. You can add elements to the system, but you can't change the basic structure of the system no matter what you add to it. The transformations of a system never lead to anything outside the system.

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Saussure's ideas on linguistics

I: THE NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

- ✦ Language is not a mere NAMING process, by which things get associated with a word or name. Instead of uniting a thing with a name, the linguistic sign unites a concept with a sound-image
- ✦ The linguistic SIGN (a key word) is made of the union of a concept and a sound image. A more common way to define a linguistic SIGN is that a SIGN is the combination of a SIGNIFIER and a SIGNIFIED. Saussure says the sound image is the SIGNIFIER and the concept the SIGNIFIED.

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II: LINGUISTIC VALUE

- ✦ Thought is a shapeless mass, which is only ordered by language
 - ✦ No ideas preexist language; language itself gives shape to ideas and makes them expressible.
- ✦ The VALUE of a sign is determined, however, not by what signifiers get linked to what particular signifieds
 - ✦ But rather by the whole system of signs used within a community
 - ✦ VALUE is the product of a system or structure (LANGUE), not the result of individual relations (PAROLE).

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III. SYNTAGMATIC AND ASSOCIATIVE RELATIONS

- ✦ The most important kind of relation between units in a signifying system, is a SYNTAGMATIC relation.
- ✦ Basically, a LINEAR relation
- ✦ In spoken or written language, words come out one by one
- ✦ Because language is linear, it forms a chain, by which one unit is linked to the next.

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Syntagms

- ✦ Combinations or relations formed by position within a chain are called SYNTAGMS.
- ✦ Language is constituted by strings of linguistic objects: words, phonemes or morphemes
 - ✦ Each object contrasts with the other objects
- ✦ The terms within a syntagm acquire VALUE only because they stand in opposition to everything before or after them. Each term IS something because it is NOT something else in the sequence.
- ✦ SYNTAGMATIC relations are most crucial in written and spoken language, where the ideas of time, linearity, and syntactical meaning are important.

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Associative Relations

- ✦ Signs are stored in your memory, for example, not in syntagmatic links or sentences, but in ASSOCIATIVE groups.
- ✦ "Education" — "-tion": education, relation, association
- ✦ Similar associations: education, teacher, textbook, college.
Random set of linkages: education, baseball, computer games, psychoanalysis
- ✦ ASSOCIATIVE relations are only in your head, not in the structure of language itself, whereas SYNTAGMATIC relations are a product of linguistic structure

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Saussurean Theory

Binary Oppositions

(defining a unit of language against what it is not)

✦ **SIGN—Signifier (Signifiant)/Signified (Signifié)**

Saussure stressed that the relationship between the signifier and the signified was entirely conventional, completely arbitrary. Both terms are psychological in nature (sound-image and concept)

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Saussurean Theory

✦ **Lingue / Parole**

- ✦ Collective language system and individual use of that system; homogeneous and heterogeneous
- ✦ Like competence & performance; base and superstructure; unconscious and conscious
- ✦ A speech community follows the same connections between a signifier and a signified

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Saussurean Theory

✦ **Synchrony / Diachrony**

- ✦ Contemporary state and historical dimension

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Saussurean Theory

✦ **Paradigm / Syntagm**

- ✦ Similarity / Contrast
- ✦ Selection / Combination

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Saussurean Theory

✦ Speech / Writing

- ✦ Speech guarantees subjectivity and presence (someone has to do the speaking)
- ✦ Writing is about absence, the absence of the speaker and what is signified by the written signifiers.
- ✦ Derrida calls the privileging of speech and presence **logocentrism**

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Saussurean Theory

- ✦ Three dictums
 - ✦ Meaning is **arbitrary** (Language isn't a reflection of the world)
 - ✦ Meaning is **relational** (paradigmatic-syntagmatic axis, 8.25 Geneva to Paris express)
 - ✦ Language **constitutes** our world (terrorist / freedom fighter, seasons)
- ✦ Many of Saussure's ideas were criticised in later times, and is not considered important today
- ✦ Controversial ending of *Course*: "Linguistics has as its unique and true object the language envisioned in itself and for itself"

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Implications on literary criticism

- ✦ Anti-humanist view
- ✦ Individual human agency underprivileged
- ✦ Neither human beings nor social phenomena have essences
- ✦ Sharp divergence from the Romantic notion of the author as the source of meaning
- ✦ Emphasis shifted from authorial intention to broader impersonal linguistic structures in which the author's text "participates"

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Implications on literary criticism

- Todorov, Greimas, reacted against Sartre's existentialism for its undue focus on the human being

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Michel Foucault's This is Not a Pipe

- ✦ In this book, Foucault questions received notions of representation in art by engaging a number of artworks by Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte.
- ✦ Foucault's argument:
 - ✦ In Modernity, people are falsely positioned within a system of seeing that links reality with visual representation
 - ✦ In saying that an image resembles reality, one assumes the ontological superiority of the latter
 - ✦ Both Magritte and Foucault are in agreement with Ferdinand de Saussure in asserting the arbitrariness of the sign.

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Saussurean Theory—Implications

- ✦ Cut across literature or humanities to give objective account of cultural practices
- ✦ Literary work becomes text (play of component elements according to codes)
- ✦ Individual author / subject is a construct, dead
- ✦ The act of Reading (not author or even reader) central agency in criticism

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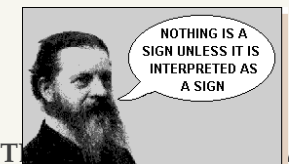
Semiotics / Semiology

- ✦ Language must be studied in itself
- ✦ Charles Sanders Peirce and Saussure
 - ✦ Saussure suggests that the study of language must be situated within the larger province of semiology. i.e., Linguistics is a part of semiology
- ✦ Science of signs (what constitutes signs, what laws govern them)

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Concepts

- ✦ A word's meaning derives entirely from its difference from other words in the sign system of language – rain not brain or sprain or rail or roan or reign
- ✦ All signs are cultural constructs that have taken on their meaning through repeated, learned, collective use



Concepts

- ✦ Even when we try to define a sign, we are always forced to use another sign to translate it. The process of communication is an unending chain of sign production, which Peirce dubbed 'unlimited semiosis'
- **wag** (n) १. ठोलिया, मसखरा, हंसोड
- **wag** (vti) १. हिलना, हिलाना, चलना, डोलना
- **wage** (n) १. मजदूरी, वेतन
- **wage** (vt) १. किराया करना, २. दांव पर लगाना, होड बढना, ३. हाथ में लेना

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Concepts

- ✦ Charles Sanders Peirce introduces the distinctions of symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs.
- ✦ Iconic "resembles its signified" (drawing of a dog; map) but still mediated
- ✦ "Indexical signs involve an existential link between the signifier and the referent: the sign relies on their joint presence in time" (smoke means fire; footprints means person)
- ✦ Symbolic—arbitrary linking through social/cultural convention.

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Denotation and Connotation

- ✦ Concepts in Semantics
- ✦ Denotation is the first order of signification: the signifier is the image itself and the signified the idea or concept—what it is a picture of.
- ✦ Connotation is a second-order signifying system that uses the first sign as its signifier and attaches an additional meaning, another signified, to it.
- ✦ Barthes argues that connotation is the primary way in which the mass media communicate ideological meaning.

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At the **DENOTATIVE** level

A photograph of the movie star Marilyn Monroe.

At a **CONNOTATIVE** level

Marilyn Monroe's star qualities of glamour, sexuality, beauty

Also her depression, drug-taking and untimely death

At a **MYTHIC** level

This sign represents the myth of Hollywood: the dream factory that produces glamour, but also crushes the artistes—all with a view to profit.

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Myth criticism: Influence

- ✦ Structuralism as a movement developed in the 1950s
- ✦ Challenged New Criticism
- ✦ Anticipated by Northrop Frye's **Myth Criticism** (1940s-mid-60s)
- ✦ Other Myth Critics: Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, Daniel Hoffman, Philip Wheelwright

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Myth Criticism

- ✦ Drew upon anthropological and psychological bases of myths, rituals & folktales to restore the spiritual content to the alienated, fragmented world ruled by scientism, empiricism and technology.
- ✦ Regarded creation of myth (with its associations with magic, imagination, dreams...) as integral to human thought

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Myth Criticism

- ✦ Literature emerges out of a core of myth
- ✦ Literature is a "system" based on "recurrent patterns"
- ✦ Myth is a collective attempt of cultures to establish a meaningful context for human existence

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Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (1957)

- ✦ Continued the formalist emphasis of New Criticism
- ✦ Insisted even more strongly that criticism should be a scientific, objective and systematic discipline
- ✦ Literary history is a repetitive and self-contained cycle (where basic symbolic myths recur: deluge myth, trickster)

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Structuralist Narratology

- ✦ A form of structuralism espoused by Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, and Gerard Genette that illustrates how a story's meaning develops from its overall structure (its langue) rather than from each individual story's isolated theme.
- ✦ To ascertain a text's meaning, narratologists emphasize grammatical elements such as verb tenses and the relationships and configurations of figures of speech within the story

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Claude Levi-Strauss & Structuralist Anthropology

- ✦ Linguistics one of the key social sciences
- ✦ Based on the idea that people think in terms of binary opposites—high / low, inside / outside, life / death
- ✦ Every culture can be understood in terms of these oppositions

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Claude Levi-Strauss & Structuralist Anthropology

- ✦ Levi-Strauss' approach arose from the philosophy of Hegel who explains that in every situation there are two opposing things and their resolution; he called these "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis"
- ✦ showed, for example, how opposing ideas would fight and also be resolved in the rules of marriage, in mythology, and in ritual

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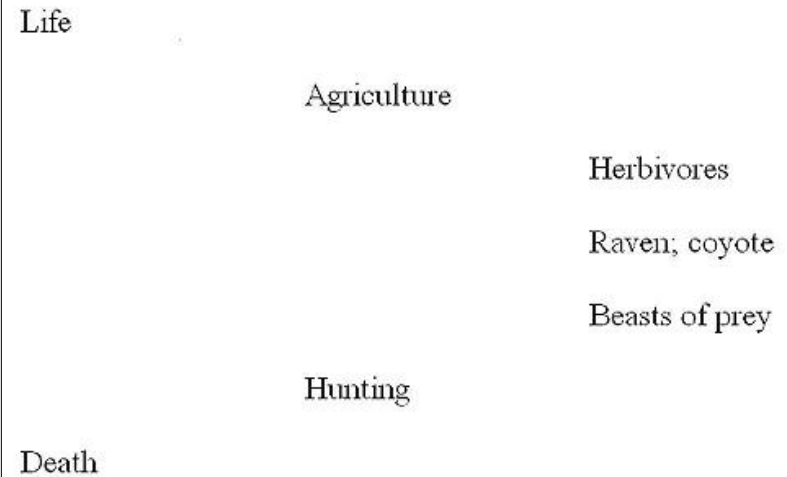
Claude Levi-Strauss

- ✦ Taught in Brazil
- ✦ Field-trips among peoples of the Amazon
- ✦ Resented Sartre's existentialism (which was humanist—the belief that human beings create their own meanings and essence)
- ✦ Analyzed cultural phenomena including mythology, kinship and food preparation
- ✦ Applied the principles of langue and parole in his search for the fundamental mental structures of the human mind (structures that form the "deep grammar" of society originate in the mind and operate in us unconsciously)

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- ✦ Myths seem fantastic and arbitrary, yet myths from different cultures are similar. Hence he said there must be universal laws that govern myths (and all human thought).
- ✦ Myths consist of (1) elements that oppose or contradict each other and (2) other elements that "mediate", or resolve, those oppositions (such as Trickster / Raven / Coyote uniting Herbivores and Carnivores)
- ✦ **Mythemes:** the smallest component parts of a myth. By breaking up myths into mythemes, those structures (mythemes) may be studied chronologically (diachronically) or synchronically / relationally

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Bricoleur and Engineer (The Savage Mind) Related to Poststructuralism

- ✦ B—works with hands in devious ways
- ✦ Puts pre-existing things together in new ways
- ✦ Makes do with whatever is at hand
- ✦ Savage Mind
- ✦ Bricolage is the characteristic of mythological thought
- ✦ Levi-Strauss argued that the "savage mind" had the same structures as the "civilized" mind and that human characteristics are the same everywhere.
- ✦ Derrida extended this to all discourses
- ✦ E—true craftsman
- ✦ Deals with projects in entirety, taking into account the availability of materials and tools
- ✦ Creates new tools and materials
- ✦ Scientific Mind

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- ✦ In The Savage Mind, structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss characterized two modes of thought, the mythical and the scientific. Mythical thought is grounded in observation of the sensible world, whereas scientific thought is grounded in the imperceptible (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Lévi-Strauss drew an analogy between mythical thought and bricolage, a French word with no precise English equivalent but similar to our notion of tinkering, of dabbling. The bricoleur is a skillful handyman, a jack-of-all-trades who uses convenient implements and ad hoc strategies to achieve his ends. Unlike the engineer, the scientific thinker who strives to construct holistic, totalizing systems from the ground up, the bricoleur performs his tasks from spare parts, from odds and ends.
- ✦ In his critique of Lévi-Strauss's (1968) reliance on scientific thought as a production of universalism, Jacques Derrida (1967/1980) showed that even the engineer is a bricoleur himself, a myth.

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Bricolage: Levi-Strauss

- ✦ In Levi-Strauss's concept of bricolage, what is important is that signs already in existence are not used for purposes that they were originally meant for. When a faucet breaks, we insert a cloth in it, so that it does not leak. The cloth is not actually meant for stopping the leak. In using it for this purpose, we transform it into a different object, by making it function in a different way altogether.

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Bricolage: Levi-Strauss

- ✦ Unlike us, the engineer would have taken into consideration the possibility that the tap might break off from the sink and he would have had either a spare faucet for this eventuality or all the spanners and bolts necessary to repair the tap.
- ✦ What Levi Strauss tries to prove is that the Savage Mind has the same features as the Scientific Mind.

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Bricolage: Levi-Strauss

- ✦ Mythology functions more like a bricoleur, whereas modern western science works more like an engineer. In Levi-Strauss's writings, the status of modern western science is ambivalent. On the one hand he endorses scientific approaches to the material under study, on the other he suggests that modern western science in contemporary societies has more or less the same status and function that mythology had in primitive societies.

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Bricolage: Derrida

- ✦ Derrida argues in "Structure, Sign and Play" that the opposition of bricolage to engineering is far more troublesome than Levi-Strauss admits. In the first place it is simply a myth to suppose it is possible for anyone "to construct the totality of his language, syntax and lexicon" or to be "the absolute origin of his own discourse". But it is precisely such control of theory and method Levi-Strauss attributes to the engineer, which would seem a very strange attribution for a structuralist to make.

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✦ “The engineer is a myth produced by the bricoleur” because the bricoleur would not be as exciting and inventive if the engineer were not so unimaginative and dreary. “As soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer, and as soon as we admit that every finite discourse is bound by a certain bricolage, and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of the bricoleurs, then the very idea of bricolage is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning breaks down.

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✦ From this, it is also clear how a binary opposition produces the myth of a privileged term by producing the myth of an absolutely opposing term. In every case, the opposing term has absolutely none of the qualities of the privileged term.

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Roland Barthes

- ✦ Work embodies transition from structuralist to poststructuralist perspectives
- ✦ Certain works have a Marxist perspective
- ✦ Extended structural analysis and semiology to broad cultural phenomena
- ✦ Confronted the limits of structuralism

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- ✦ Early works derived inspiration from Saussure, Sartre, Brecht
 - ✦ Writing Degree Zero (1953)
 - ✦ Mythologies (1957)
- ✦ Structuralist works
 - ✦ Elements of Semiology (1964)
 - ✦ “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” (1966)
 - ✦ “Death of the Author” (1968)
- ✦ Poststructuralist works
 - ✦ S/Z (analysis of Sarrasine, 1970)
 - “From Work to Text”
 - The Pleasure of the Text

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Roland Barthes

- ✦ In Mythologies
- ✦ Ideological critique of products of mass bourgeois culture
 - ✦ soap, advertisements, images of Rome...
 - ✦ attempt to discover a “universal nature” behind this
 - ✦ This is explained using the concept of “myth”

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Barthes' notion of “myth”

- ✦ Myth is a language, a mode of signification
- ✦ Reiterates Saussure's view that semiology comprises three terms: signifier, signified and sign
- ✦ “Sign” is a relation
- ✦ The structure of myth repeats this tridimensional pattern (Myth is a second-order signifying system illustrated by the example of the young Negro)

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a young negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably gazing at the French flag.

MATERIAL

Orders of signification

- ✦ An idea Barthes adopted from Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev
- ✦ **First-order signification** (linguistic level): the French are militaristic
- ✦ **Second-order signification** (mythological level): France is a great Empire, and all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag; the zeal shown by this negro in serving France shows that the allegations against colonialism are all false)
- ✦ Democracy, freedom, American imperialism etc are all such myths, wrenched from their historical contexts to mean and naturalize peace, world order and security
- ✦ The very principle of myth is “to transform history into nature”

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- ✦ Ideology and culture, as kinds of propaganda, work best when they are not recognized as such because they contribute to the construction of what people think of as “common sense”
- ✦ “The whole of France is steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our cinema, our theatre, our popular literature, our ceremonies, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks on the weather, the crimes we try, the wedding we are moved by, the cooking we dream of, the clothes we wear, everything, in our everyday life, contributes to the representation that the bourgeoisie makes for itself and for us of the relationships between man and the world.”

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✦ **Death of the Author (1968)**

- ✦ Deconstructionist, anti-humanist theory
- ✦ Author, symbolically male and end of all meaning, is now deposed.
- ✦ The Death of the Author is followed by the Birth of the reader; not just the reader, but the scriptor or writer.
- ✦ The writer is an agent or medium created in language rather than existing before or after it, who mixes writings, counters one with the others, never to rest on any one of them.

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Roland Barthes

- ✦ In S/Z (study of Balzac's “Sarrasine”):
 - ✦ **Readerly** (lisible) text (specific meanings—close meaning; conventions of 19th century Realism; console the reader; fulfills expectations; pleasure)
 - ✦ **Writerly** (scriptable) text (galaxy of signifiers—encourages reader to be producer of meanings; conventions of Modernism; disturb the reader; resists closure; presents plurality; jouissance)

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Roland Barthes

✦ **In The Pleasure of the Text:**

- ✦ Comfortable **plaisir** (pleasure) of convntl texts; comes from culture and does not break with it
- ✦ **jouissance** (bliss) of uncontrolled play of signifiers; imposes a state of loss, defamiliarizes and unsettles the reader's historical, cultural and psychological assumptions (a modernist or avant-garde text)

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American Structuralists of 1960s

✦ Roman Jakobson

✦ Jonathan Culler (Structuralist Poetics), etc

In the field of semiotics

✦ C. S. Peirce

✦ Charles Morris

✦ Noam Chomsky

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