



Roland Barthes: the Image and the Imaginary

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In his semiotic critique of culture, Roland Barthes was dealing with signs, but also with images. In this paper, I will try to analyze his cognitive and moral strategies in their regard and to distinguish between two different aspects of the image in his work, the visual and the “invisible” ones, the latter producing in their turn the category of the imaginary. As I will show, the image is highly ambivalent for Barthes: it does not only constitute a field to explore but also a danger to escape, an adversary to fight against, and sometimes a beloved object to preserve.

For the first survey of the problem let me rapidly discuss two extracts from *Mythologies* (1957), a book which is not exactly about images and which does not theorize them; so my two extracts are taken out not from theoretical statements, but from theoretical examples.

The first example is well-known: Barthes is analyzing a cover of the magazine *Paris-Match*, with a photograph of an African boy in a French uniform supposedly saluting a French flag; the whole image, Barthes explains, signifies the “French imperialism”, allegedly supported by all the people of the empire, in a moment when that empire is facing serious problems with its colonies. Barthes discerns two levels of signification in this photograph, and in his analysis, we find the term *image*:

On the cover, a young Negro in French uniform is saluting, his eyes are raised and probably staring at a fold of the tricolor flag. This is the meaning of the image... (.) But, whether I am naïve or not, I perfectly see what that image signifies: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons without distinction of color serve faithfully under her flag, etc.

[Sur la couverture, un jeune nègre vêtu d'un uniforme français fait le salut militaire, les yeux levés, fixés sans doute sur un pli du drapeau tricolore. Cela, c'est le sens de l'image [...]. Mais, naïf ou pas, je vois bien ce qu'elle me signifie : que la France est un grand Empire, que tous ses fils, sans distinction de couleur, servent fidèlement sous son drapeau, etc.]¹

The visual photographic image has a meaning, an immediately perceived object (“a black boy in uniform saluting something above him”). But this primary meaning, however obvious it might be, is not verbalized: there is no legend on the magazine cover but only some titles of articles not linked to the photograph, in such a way that we have to guess what it exactly displays; the solution of the enigma can be

¹ BARTHES (R.), *Œuvres complètes* (O.C.), Paris, Seuil, 1993-1994, t. I, p. 688. Hereinafter all translations are mine.

found but further, somewhere inside the magazine's issue. A fortiori we can only infer the second, "mythical" meaning of the image (the "French imperialism"): our socio-political experience will serve us as a major premise completing the visual enthymeme; the visual and the textual constitute a syllogism but a deficient syllogism. The image is not meaningless, but its primary and secondary meanings remain implicit and undetermined, they are to be verbalized, and it's a task of the analyst (Barthes) to explicit the image's legend, to finalize the image with his own critical text aiming to clarify and denounce its ideological content.

The second theoretical example used by Barthes is also well-known: it is the hypothetical "language of the woodcutter", supposed to be purely instrumental and free of all "mythical" significations. The word image appears discretely in the middle of Barthes's analysis:

If I am a woodcutter and if I happen to name the tree I am cutting down, whatever the form of my sentence I speak the tree², I do not speak about it [...] this is the language through which I act the object: the tree is not an image for me, it is simply the meaning of my action. But if I am not a woodcutter, I can no longer speak the tree, I can only speak about it [...] the tree is no longer the meaning of reality as a human action, it is an image-at-disposal...

[Si je suis un bûcheron et que j'en vienne à nommer l'arbre que j'abats, quelle que soit la forme de ma phrase, je parle l'arbre, je ne parle pas sur lui [...] c'est là un langage par lequel j'agis l'objet : l'arbre n'est pas pour moi une image, il est simplement le sens de mon acte. Mais si je ne suis pas un bûcheron, je ne puis plus parler l'arbre, je ne puis que parler sur lui [...] l'arbre n'est plus le sens du réel comme acte humain, il est une image-à-disposition...]³.

The notions of "image" and "meaning" are once again brought together, but no longer linked by solidarity (an image has a meaning, at least an implicit one) but by complementarity: either the tree is the meaning of human action, or it becomes an "image-at-disposal", a mythical object with ideological significations. The image no longer precedes its own meaning: it follows that meaning, abolishing its direct relationship with human action. The image is defined here by the very fact that it substitutes itself to an act, stands between the man and his act as a too handy object "at disposal"; this is why it is denounced by Barthes just as in the previous example: it's a form of false consciousness. Images of this kind are not visual, but we cannot say they are mental either: they are socially produced and situated not only in one's mind but also in the space of interpersonal interactions. Such complex "images" are shaped out of social attitudes, statements and evaluations (the value of the wood, the beauty of the tree), sometimes also of visual images circulating in the world and in people's minds. By their nature they are not compact entities but networks of discontinuous and heterogeneous elements and relationships; not strictly organized structures but *diffuse semantic systems*⁴.

So, the notion of image is ambiguous, as there are two sorts of images, according to the author of *Mythologies*: on the one hand there are visual images, concentrated and well delimited, carrying explicit and implicit meanings, and on the other hand diffuse social and mental images, having no concentrated support, invalidating the primary material meaning of actions and substituting to it their secondary, mythical significations. Along with visible images, there are invisible ones too⁵. In more rigorous semiotic terms, we can say that there are images-signifiers and images-signified. The former *uphold* ideological meanings, the latter are those meanings. Both categories of image seem suspect to Barthes, their ideological charge should be demystified by a semiotic analysis; however, the image-signified is more resistant to demystification, because it is diffuse: images-signifiers are clearly offered to me by others (in propaganda, advertising, etc.) and remain external to my mind, whereas I am personally implicated into images-signified, they engross my affective reactions, I produce them in my discourse (every time when I speak instead of acting). They

² In French, the verb *parler* (to speak) is normally intransitive, and employed with prepositions (*parler de...* - to speak of...). In Barthes's text, it becomes transitive (*je parle l'arbre*, "I speak the tree"), in order to render precisely the transitive and not mediated relationship between the speaking/acting subject and his object.

³ O.C., t. I, p. 709-710.

⁴ I have attempted to define such semantic systems in an article published in Russian: Zenkin (S.), "Social Fact and Thing", in Zenkin (S.), *Raboty o Teorii*, Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2012, p. 13-24.

⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (M.), *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.

are not exactly hidden in my soul, nevertheless their manifold manifestations are hardly accessible to objective investigation. In his writings, Barthes analyzes, deconstructs, and subverts both kinds of images, be they named in that way or not.

Visual images-signifiers are addressed in Barthes's semiotic articles of the '60s and early '70s such as "Le message photographique", "Rhétorique de l'image", "Le troisième sens", where the author aims to reduce the image by assimilating it to the language: to find out in its apparent continuity some discontinuous signifiers comparable to linguistic meaningful elements. In "Rhétorique de l'image", he names those signifiers *connotators*, and stresses their discontinuous and isolated character:

The most important thing however, at least at this moment, is not to inventory the connotators, but to realize that they constitute discontinuous, or better, erratic marks in the total image. Connotators do not fill the whole lexia, their reading does not exhaust it.

[Le plus important toutefois du moins pour le moment ce n'est pas d'inventorier les connotateurs, c'est de comprendre qu'ils constituent dans l'image totale des traits discontinus ou mieux encore : erratiques. Les connotateurs ne remplissent pas toute la lexie, leur lecture ne l'épuise pas]⁶.

The analyst picks up in the total image some "erratic marks", supporting its secondary ideological signification. Whereas denotative signifiers cover the whole surface of the visual image (each of them referring to a fact of the visible world), connotative signifiers are distinct from each other like letters and words: for instance, in an advertising of Panzani pasta, the string-bag containing its ingredients connotes "market" and "domestic cooking" as opposed to cans, while the three dominant colors (yellow, green and red) connote the Italian flag, that is "italianity", along with the Italian producer's name. These signifiers, though juxtaposed within the perceptive space as figure and ground (the bag and the colors), are not however immediately linked in the fictive world of the image, there is no continuous passage between them.

The analyst finds something more to certain images: asemantic, purely affective elements, disseminated as well over the holistic body of image; such elements of "the third", or "obtuse" meaning come closer to corporal effects of the text than to semantic units. Their punctual presence does not bring any codified, linguistic or quasi-linguistic ("mythical") signification. Analyzing a few images taken out from Sergey Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*, Barthes identifies as such elements the Czar's small beard, the hair of a character, the heavy make-up and the "stupid" nose of another one, etc.⁷ Their loose and discontinuous relationships form a diffuse semantic system, and they may be detected but subjectively, by the observer's taste, no "major premise" of syllogism can help locate them. The observer, who is no longer an objective analyst but a creative subject, adds to the image a third-degree semiotic system, an affective level overwriting the levels of visual denotations and semantic connotations. His gesture is not far from *deformation*, produced from outside by the disrespectful bystanders of images. Appreciating the "third meaning" of images, Barthes for the same reason sympathizes with their "ironic" subversion (in the article "Société, imagination, publicité", 1968):

...the means by which we can contest the conformism of advertising remain episodic, hidden or stealthy, by definition unknown; they are but anonymous gestures: alterations, deformations and lacerations, most often obscene, of the wall advertising posters, striving to "steal" the clichés from the language of advertising, in order to make them ridiculous or erotic.

[...les moyens que nous avons de contester le conformisme publicitaire restent-ils épisodiques, cachés ou furtifs, par définition inconnus ; ce ne sont que des gestes anonymes : altérations, déformations et lacérations, le plus souvent obscènes, d'affiches murales, dont le ressort est de « voler » à la langue publicitaire ses clichés, pour les tourner soit en dérision soit en érotisme]⁸.

⁶ *O.C.*, t. I, p. 1428.

⁷ *O.C.*, t. II, p. 868.

⁸ *O.C.*, t. II, p. 516 ("Société, imagination, publicité", 1968).

In *Mythologies*, Barthes had already pointed out a possibility of “stealing” the myths by adding to them, for example in literature, new, tertiary significations, connotations superposed onto connotations; in a later article he explicitly approves such a practice with respect to visual advertising, be it in the simplest and roughest form of damaging its posters. The professional writer and the nameless street vandal, in a certain sense, do the same thing: they overwrite the visual image, inscribing onto its surface their proper discontinuous signs: not conventional connotators but bearers of the bodily “third sense”, related to corporal reactions of laughter and sexual excitation. In this respect, the work of theory or of social critique, imposing onto “mythic” images its own demystifying metalanguage, turns to be close to the contesting gestures of literature or of contemporary street art; the only difference is that the critical work does not search for bodily mimesis but for intellectual persuasiveness of its explicit statements. In a text of 1971, “La mythologie, aujourd’hui”, Barthes claims that the semiotic study of signs (all signs, not only “myths”) should be completed by their “semioclastic” destruction⁹; so does he in respect of images, too, proposing a kind of intelligent, methodic iconoclasm.

The mental images-signified, the second sort of images, have a particular character of not being isolated but constituting – sometimes along with certain visual images-signifiers – a totality: the *imaginary*. The importance of that category increases obviously in Barthes’s late and more “personal” texts of the ’70s, at the same time that he distances himself from the strict semiotic science. In his self-descriptive book *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), he introduces a special section on “L’Imaginaire”, and in his following book *Fragments of a Lover Discourse* (1977), a section on “Images”. The terminological duality – *image / the imaginary* – finds its roots in the Lacanian psychoanalysis, probably unknown to Barthes earlier. “The imaginary”, a psychic register that Jacques Lacan opposed to “the real” and “the symbolic”, is supposed to integrate the subject’s moments of self-perception and self-awareness, and to originate from the so-called “mirror stage”, when the young infant recognizes his or her identity in a mirror. Barthes quotes explicitly but ironically this idea in the legend (curiously placed inside the image’s framework) of his early childhood photograph, inserted into *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: “The stage of mirror: You are this” [*Le stade du miroir : « Tu es cela »*]¹⁰, and dated “Cherbourg, 1916”¹¹. The photograph shows Roland Barthes’s mother presenting her baby (born a few months earlier, in November 1915) – not to a mirror of course, but to a camera. We are invited to read the irony of the adult author in his Lacanian legend: “the stage of mirror”, the recognition of one’s personal identity is in reality not an individual but a social act, passing in that case, not through a simple family mirror but through the cultural instance of (professional) photography. Indeed, the little Roland cannot see himself in the camera’s black eye, while he is already being identified by the society and its visual culture, while his first technical image is already being made and at the same time he is being included into a social network of relationships and gestures (visiting the photographer, exhibiting oneself to the camera, showing one’s photos to other people).

As follows from this visual parable, the socially produced image (signifier or signified) precedes the individual imaginary, and the subject must inevitably assume his or her prefabricated images, which can be eventually visual (a photograph) but finally refer to mental ones. Barthes rereads Lacan in his own way: the imaginary, for him, is less an individual property of the self-conscious subject than his or her interiorized self-representation, made out from socially constructed images; in other words, a “global assumption of the image” [*assomption globale de l’image*]¹². Barthes metaphorically expresses it in a special article entitled “L’Image” (1977): “the image is a kind of social military service; I cannot get exempted from it; I cannot be declared unfit for service, I cannot desert, etc.” [*l’image est une sorte de service militaire social : je ne puis m’en faire exempter ; je ne puis me faire reformer, désertier, etc.*]¹³. Any social individual, and especially passionate people, must do that service: for example, a mother’s son and/or a lover is a prisoner of images – not necessary of his own ones, but also of the images representing the beloved person. In

⁹ O.C., t. II, p. 1184 (“La mythologie aujourd’hui”, 1971).

¹⁰ O.C., III, p. 105.

¹¹ O.C., t. III, p. 244.

¹² O.C., t. III, p. 175.

¹³ O.C., t. III, p. 874.

Fragments of a Lover Discourse, Barthes explains the lover's suffering by his exclusion from the images he sees: even if they are his own mental ones, that does not matter, they belong to the others all the same:

The Image stands out; it is pure and distinct like a letter; it is the letter of what makes me suffer. Precise, complete, perfect, final, it leaves no place for me; I am excluded from it as from the primitive scene, which may exist only in so far as it is cut out by the contour of the keyhole. Here is at last the definition of the image: the image is what I am excluded from.

[L'image se découpe : elle est pure et nette comme une lettre : elle est la lettre de ce qui me fait mal. Précise, complète, figlée, définitive, elle ne me laisse aucune place : j'en suis exclu comme de la scène primitive, qui n'existe peut-être que pour autant qu'elle est découpée par le contour de la serrure. Voici donc, enfin, la définition de l'image : l'image, c'est ce dont je suis exclu]¹⁴.

Our imaginary is produced, filled, and interpreted by the others: "'image': what I believe the other thinks of me" [*"image": ce que je crois que l'autre pense de moi*]¹⁵. I cannot control my imaginary, and therefore I am excluded from it, even if I am personally represented in an image. Surely I am more implicated into the imaginary than into an ordinary visual image: the imaginary also includes profound mental images and defines the very mode of my being. Unlike the images-signifiers, its images-signified are normally deprived of any material expression, they consist of abstract "qualities", having no observable and decomposable features; it's as if they were secondary signs without primary ones, connotations without denotations (semiotically, this is a *contradictio in adjecto*). In Barthes's terms of the '50s, the imaginary might be defined as a generalized and aggravated kind of "myth": the myths, as understood by Barthes, parasitize real objects ("the wine is good but the wine's goodness is a myth"), now they seem to throw away their semiotic ties to material reality and become diffuse systems of relations. The challenge consists in finding out any means of unmasking the myths of the imaginary without producing a secondary mythic image of "somebody who struggles against images".

The problem had a personal dimension for Barthes. In his late texts – the article "L'Image", the book *Camera lucida* (1980), the courses at the Collège de France (especially *The Neutral*, 1977-1978) – he expressed his sorrow about his situation of celebrated author imprisoned in his own social image. In fact, it was only an extreme form of a common situation, affecting everyone: "I see man sick of images, of his own Image" [*Je vois l'homme malade d'images, malade de son Image*]¹⁶. What might be then the remedy for that disease? How to avoid any social qualification, how to become a happy "man without qualities" and without image (an old Romantic myth paradoxically turned inside out, a flaw becoming an advantage)? Barthes does not provide a theoretical answer to this question¹⁷, but in his writings he tests several symbolic operations that could offer a solution. They are mostly directed against visual images, external and superficial manifestations of the imaginary; but in Barthes's idea they must concern images-signified as well as images-signifiers. They have a double aim: to protect the subject from the aggression of socio-mental Images (with a capital letter)¹⁸ but also to protect visual images (with lower case) from the domination of the imaginary, to preserve their ideal integrity of the "woodcutter's language" threatened by the alienating systems of mythical meanings. In other words, Barthes plays image against Image¹⁹.

¹⁴ *O.C.*, t. III, p. 583.

¹⁵ *O.C.*, t. III, p. 873.

¹⁶ *O.C.*, t. III, p. 874.

¹⁷ The "imaginary" mostly refers in Barthes to Lacanian terminology, but has also a Sartrian signification; that is why Barthes's last book *Camera lucida* is dedicated not to Sartre personally, but to his book *The Imaginary* (1940). The imaginary is made out of socially conditioned elements and may be considered as a form of social responsibility. See ZENKINE (S.), « La responsabilité de Roland Barthes », in *Revue Roland Barthes*, 2018, n°4, <http://revue.roland-barthes.org/2018/07/serge-zenkine/51353>.

¹⁸ "I desire, I strive for the Abstinence from Images, because each Image is wicked" [*Je souhaite, je soupire après l'Abstinence des Images car toute Image est mauvaise*]. – *O.C.*, t. III, p. 874.

¹⁹ So, "the subjugating evil that emanates from the imaginary of images" [*le maléfice subjuguant qui émane de l'imaginaire des images*] (THOMAS (Ch.), *Pour Roland Barthes*, Seuil, 2015, p. 117) can be counteracted only by the introduction of a super-image, the "photo in the Winter Garden", in *Camera lucida*. See also ZENKINE (S.), *Cinq lectures de Roland Barthes*, Classiques Garnier, 2017, chapter 5.

The first of his anti-imaginary operations is once again critical overwriting, which subverts the imaginary with quasi-linguistic (“symbolic”, in Lacan’s terms) marks; those marks may constitute either a metalinguistic analysis or a mimesis of writing. So in his book *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes attempted to “stage” [*mettre en scène*], to “echelon” and to “sign” his imaginary²⁰ in two parallel ways: a critical analysis and a practical destabilization of his own images, of “what I believe the other thinks of me”. The book was published in a collection in which each item was supposed to present a classical author “by himself” (in fact, always by a modern critic, with long extracts from the presented author’s work). Traditionally the book’s cover had to bear a portrait of the author in question. Barthes’s book was not written by another critic but indeed *by himself*, and its first edition had no portrait on its cover; instead of a visual representation of Roland Barthes’s figure, it was decorated with a reproduction of his amateur abstract painting, strangely looking like unreadable lines of handwriting. This allusion was highlighted by the presence of other handwritten fragments inside the book, one of which was meaningless as well as the scribble on the cover. So, Barthes substituted to his “image” a simulacrum of his “writing”, but managed to make that writing empty of meaning, in order to avoid constituting any fixed semiotic system, which would be inevitably converted into a new “author’s image”, his public “image-at-disposal”.

The second device of anti-imaginary defense is not overwriting but overlapping, superimposing images: for example, adding an absent image to present ones. This procedure may be implicit and even unconscious, as it seems to happen in an illustration of *Camera lucida* (1980). In this book, Barthes distinguishes between two elements of photographic message: the *studium* constituted by recognizable semantic units and finally referring to a code, and the *punctum*, an a-systemic effect of the image, which cannot be linked to any code and corresponds to “the third meaning” of cinematographic images, as it has been defined in Barthes’s article of the same title. It’s the *punctum* that allows the spectator to get closer to the *noema* of photography; however, Barthes also introduces into his book some photographs in which he does not seem to find any punctum. Among them there is William Klein’s photo “The First of May in Moscow” (1959), presented as interesting for the book’s author only for its “ethnographic” details:

...it shows me how the Russians dress (what I don’t know after all): I notice the big cap of a boy, the tie of another one, the old woman’s kerchief, the adolescent’s haircut, etc.

[...il m’apprend comment s’habillent les Russes (ce qu’après tout je ne sais pas) : je note la grosse casquette d’un garçon, la cravate d’un autre, le foulard de tête de la vieille, la coupe de cheveux d’un adolescent, etc.]²¹.

But the very nature of the elements he isolates in the image (minor physical traits of people, including their face, their hair) suggests a similarity with those noted by Barthes in Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* as bearers of the “third meaning”. And the intertextual - or more exactly “interimaginal” - analysis can reveal another motive for introducing this photograph. According to Denis Roche’s memoir, Barthes chose illustrations for his book by intuition, among a lot of old and new clichés that had been put at his disposal²². If he picked out this one, he might have done so by association with the first sequence of Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *China* (1972), that he had watched and had referred to in an article (“Le bruissement de la langue”, 1975). Antonioni’s movie showed faces and clothes of Chinese people gathered “a day of May” on the great square Tiananmen in Beijing and, more interestingly, gathered for being *photographed* there. The filmic images were already superimposed upon primary photographic ones, and some of them overwritten with the film’s credit titles. Such a complicated, three-level visual structure could attract Barthes’s attention by its “echeloning” of images, as well as by its political connotations related to his own political “imaginary” of independent leftist. This is why a few years later an old photograph of Moscow May celebration might have reminded him of Antonioni’s sequence; the Russian image was superimposed in its turn upon the Chinese one, by double politico-optical association implying a discrete self-criticism:

²⁰ O.C., t. III, p. 175.

²¹ O.C., t. III, p. 1127.

²² ROCHE (D.), « Un discours affectif sur l’image », in *Roland Barthes : Nouveaux regards*, Magazine littéraire, 2013, p. 123.

the visual confrontation of two communist countries, hostile to each other in 1980, could indirectly “demystify” their ideological “mythology” and their attractiveness for European leftists²³.

Finally, a third means of defense from the imaginary consists in the occultation of visual images in order to protect them. In *Camera lucida*, Barthes speaks once again about his problems with his own (visual) image. He would like his representation to coincide with his profound self, but he never recognizes himself on his photographs, because of their social functions transcendent to him:

...for I don't know what society makes of my photograph, what it reads in it [...] but when I discover myself on the product of that operation, what I see is that I have become All-Image, in other words Death in person...

[...car ce que la société fait de ma photo, ce qu'elle y lit, je ne le sais pas [...] mais lorsque je me découvre sur le produit de cette opération, ce que je vois, c'est que je suis devenu Tout-Image, c'est-à-dire la Mort en personne...] ²⁴.

He finds out a possibility to escape this pernicious influence of images, thanks to the discovery of an old photograph of his recently deceased mother; that woman, he explains, has been miraculously protected from the illness of images:

She was not struggling with her image, as I am with mine: she did not suppose herself.

[Elle ne se débattait pas avec son image, comme je le fais avec la mienne : elle ne se supposait pas] ²⁵.

Mental images-signified are mostly produced by society, regardless of anybody's individual initiative: one does not have to “suppose” anything about oneself for being given a social image. Consequently, the magical protection from image-production of Barthes's mother must not depend on her own character, but rather on her son's symbolic activity. He is the one who protects her beloved photographic image from harmful socialization by concealing and sacralizing it. Indeed, he never shows that photograph, stressing its importance but replacing it with a verbal description, an *ekphrasis*, a text: once again he intends to “sign” his imaginary²⁶, to overwrite it, but in this case his enterprise leads to an entire occultation of the original image (not his own image, but a beloved person's one). He preserves the intimacy of that image, without any social meanings, at the price of evacuating its materiality and visibility, of transforming a visual image into a network of words and utterances: a book.

The famous “photo in the Winter Garden”, described but not displayed in *Camera lucida*, is, one might say, a mirror reflection of the “stage of mirror” photo introduced into *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: the latter shows in real time the moment of socialization, i.e. the alienation of the infant by his own mother, and the former, overturning their age difference, withdraws the little girl-mother from the social imaginary and keeps her in an intimate relationship with her adult son. In contrast to the social imaginary, it becomes invisible, replaced by the author's text.

In conclusion, images-signifiers and images-signified are situated at the heart of Barthes's cultural theory, at the same level as signs. The image is not only an ambiguous notion but an ambivalent element of culture, having positive or negative values. Images constitute a space of intimacy and self-identification but at the same time a privileged vehicle of false cultural meanings particularly difficult to eradicate from their continual structure and producing in turn diffuse systems of the imaginary. The alienating effects of images take place on the individual level as well as on the socio-political one: the imaginary can deform one's personal experience and subdue it to “what the other thinks of it”, and such representations may originate in collective ideological systems, as for example (in Barthes's critical texts) in French colonialism or Chinese communism. To overcome the “wicked” images and to protect the “good”, cherished ones, special

²³ While being leftist, Barthes was never fascinated by the Soviet communism. In 1974, he visited China with a group of French intellectuals working for the review *Tel Quel*; the experience was boring, if not disappointing for him.

²⁴ *O.C.*, t. III, p. 1117-1118.

²⁵ *O.C.*, t. III, p. 1157.

²⁶ *O.C.*, t. III, p. 175.

symbolic operations are required, irreducible to pure linguistic or metalinguistic statements. It is not sufficient to provide right and critical legends to images to get free of the imaginary; the deepest and wisest analytical speculation should be completed with non-verbal procedures such as overwriting images (eventually not with real words but with a pseudo-text), superimposing one image to another, or occulting certain particularly important ones. It is not by accident that Barthes, as early as in *Mythologies*, linked his critique of images to the idea of human act (“the language of woodcutter”): in order to take a critical position towards the imaginary, not only speaking but acting is necessary.