
STRUCTURAL-SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS: A WAY OF DECODING MODERN SOCIAL MYTHS

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The main purpose of this paper is to articulate and demonstrate a logical structural-semiotic methodology applied to the analysis of modern myths and their manifestations. Principally emanating from the works of Roland Barthes, this method assimilates ideas from several prominent semiologists and sociologists to reveal and understand the nature of myth.

Barthes' famous two-level semiological structure of myths, where meaning of one sign can be used as a signifier, provides the basis for theoretical synthesis between semiological and sociological statements and stresses the question as to how the relations between the signifier and the signified of the second level are created, and what elements of both semantic and perceptual spaces are crucial for providing the crystallized and obvious, *given*, common-sense image of myth.

Structural-semiotic analysis as a methodological basis for contemplating socio-cultural reality

Although semiotics is a recognized discipline within communication theories, it remains on the margins of popular discourse and at the crossroads of contradicting cognitions. It is often articulated through rich and literary description such as in essays written by Barthes (1972) and Eco (1986). But they can give an impression of being un-authoritative, merely entertaining, or polemic. Nevertheless, semiotic analysis provides combined methodology for contemplating socio-cultural reality.

- 'The structural-semiologists seek to look beneath the observed social surface to find out the underlying construction of the given phenomena. The more obvious structural organization may seem to be, the more difficult it is to see beyond this surface' (Langholz Leymore, 1975, 9). Searching for what is hidden beneath the obvious can lead to fruitful insights; it can help to understand how socially accepted symbolic constructions are built, which main inter-semantic fields provide a general way of perceiving and explaining certain phenomena. Hence, semiotics helps us to realise that whatever assertions seem to be 'obvious', permanent and incontrovertible are generated by the ways in which sign systems operate in our ordinary discourse.

- Semiotics can help to make us aware of what we take for granted, reminding that we are always dealing with sign systems and not with an unmediated objective reality, and that sign systems are involved in the construction of a universal space of meanings. This is an issue of everyday life construction. By their semantic poles symbolic systems reconstitute the portrait of reality that seems to be natural, explicable, and exemptible.

- There are no ideologically neutral sign systems: signs always function both to persuade and to refer. Sign systems help to naturalize and confirm particular framings of 'the way things are'. Consequently, semiotic analysis always involves ideological analysis.

Many semiologists see their primary task in *denaturalizing* signs, texts and codes. Semiotics can thus show ideology at work and demonstrate that reality can be challenged.

Myth as a coded reflection of socio-cultural reality

The following section articulates such a theoretical formula of myth as it is derived from the works of major social theorists. Subsequent sections will demonstrate the application of theory extended to the analysis of myth within contemporary cultural texts.

There are numerous, often contradicting theoretical conceptions over the origins, structure and functions of myths. In order to clarify those theoretical bases on which we are going to build our approach, let us present the main features of myth's essence taken for granted within this paper.

Popular usage of the term myth suggests that it refers to a fairy-tale and has no relations with the modern rational individual's opinions and actions. In fact, a great deal of human world-perception takes place in mythological space. Myth is a holistic portrait of a certain social reality; it has its inner semantics and logic of development. The *truth* of the myth is the *truth* of being: within the frameworks of myth the being is perceived as real, true and objective reality. However, myth is not only the attitude towards the world but also the way for the world's systemization. Modern sociological approaches examine myth as a mechanism for understanding the social reality, as a form of social consciousness where the trivial dominates the scientific, the illogical the logical, the ideal and fictional the real.

Myths are being activated especially in the periods of social transformations and crisis when the flaws of changes are so intensive that the social majority is unable to find rational and general explanations and to forecast the probable ways of development. Here myth serves as a mechanism for searching answers. Its convenience comes from the fact that although social communicative messages have numerous, even contradictory explanations, myth suggests one single matrix of explanation with minimal contradictions, uncertainties and risks.

We consider myth as a socio-cultural text that stores socially significant information, has a specific status and a pointedly semantic tinge.

Applied methodology for decoding modern mythological systems

Myth is a symbolic reflection of reality and at the same time a combination of symbolic structures. The axes of myths are constructed on semantic spaces using each feature of their elements. Semantic spaces are generated by myths and in turn serve to maintain them. Within the framework of structural semiotics, myth is the top element of a sign-pyramid. The three levels of pyramid describe the patterns of signs development, sketch the very space of reality, and map the place where myths are created and recreated. The conventionality of symbols that provides the fixed nature of 'sign-meaning' relations is the first level of the semantic pyramid. On its basis, second order symbols are created that according to Losyev (2001) contain other, culturally more significant sign systems that neutralize their primary meaning. Hence, the natural basis of language constitutes cultural horizons. The symbols of third order maintain the existence of sense out of their borders. This kind of symbols cannot be decoded by simple mind; in order to understand them we have to move from their cultural context to their inner structure. Thus, the symbols of the

third level accomplish the development of the language sign system. Tracing from zero degree semiosis we reach its third stage - myth. Although myths operate with a limited number of symbols driven from universal mythological plots, in the mythologems the creation of each new statement/discourse requires that the symbol be contrived again by enriching its framework with a new concept/connotation.

The most detailed explanation of correlation between concept and sign is given by R. Barthes (1972). This seminal work merits examination in order to establish background, orientation, and perspective on the importance of myth semiological analysis.

The issues of meaning, sign and myth

In order to address the problems brought out by the analysis of myths, this section intends to describe the theoretical foundations of denotation/signifier and connotation/signified relations within myth's semiological construction. The *first order of signification* is that of denotation: on this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a *second-order of signification* which uses the denotative sign as its signifier and attaches an additional signified to it. In this framework, connotation is a sign that derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations) (Barthes, 1987). The project of myth analysis consists in articulating the relationship among all aspects of a sign system that constructs meaning around social assumptions embedded in the form. The first (denotative) order (or level) of signification is seen as primarily representational and relatively self-contained. The second (connotative) order of signification reflects expressive values which are attached to a sign. In the third (mythological or ideological) order of signification the sign reflects major socially variable concepts that underpin a particular life-world.

According to Barthes' conception, the myth consists of two semiological systems and a triple structure: *the signifier, the signified and the sign*. The interrelation between *the signifier and the signified* creates the sign, which on the one hand is the final element of the first semiological system and on the other hand is the basic element for the second system (myth or meta-language). Myth neutralizes the sense, making it a clear form. Then, it puts its own sum of meanings that makes the form sacral and creates sign or symbol - the final element of myth's essence.

As long as the interrelation between the form (for example the name of a political leader) and the concept (the ideas of unification, order, authoritarianism, etc.) is not clear, it will be impossible to properly interpret a certain phenomenon.

What is crucial here is the fact that the relations between the sign and its connotation must be natural, common sense and ordinary according to the frameworks of a given life-world. From this point of view, another considerable feature of myths comes out. That is, they are created through ordinary reality and make the reality be ordinary.

Mythological portrait of everyday life reality

The fixed image of relations between the signifier and the signified takes place through 'inter-subjective' responses that are shared to some degree by members of a culture. Connotations are not purely personal meanings; they are determined by the codes to which an interpreter has access. Cultural codes provide a connotational framework since they are organized around key oppositions and equations, and their each term is aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes.

Myth is a story that contains every event that bestows upon them a matter-of-factly character. Thus, we can say that it just uses those frames of mind that allow it to penetrate into the ordinary level of social consciousness.

As it is mentioned by P. Berger and T. Luckmann, the reality of everyday life is both constructing the sum of subjective senses, collective ideas and stereotypes, and constructed by their systemized typologies (Berger and Luckmann, 1995). As these typologies can function in different times and spaces, the ordinary reality validates them with the help of one of the most crystallized, socially created sign systems – mythology. Everyday life reality is constructed around ‘here and now’. Nothing beyond ‘here and now’ can be understood by ordinary knowledge. In order to understand and explain them social consciousness creates different myths which have numerous ways of penetrating into ordinary life

Myth is constituted by the form of social discourse. It neglects its historical, socially constructed perspective and privileges a natural order of understanding. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk, stress them, purifying and making them ‘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.

Myth as a story: narrative structure and basic elements for analysis

The mythological overview of reality consists in a certain cultural text constructed on some given narratives. Within the framework of this analysis the textual constitution and narrative manifestation of myths are analyzed not in lingual-literal sense, but rather as an envelope converting and transferring communicative messages of mythological ideas. The latter is presented as a coded socio-cultural text. Text is an ordered number of signs united in a single semantic space. Symbols are supposed to be texts because of their deep, sometimes even mystic semantics. Operating with a certain number of symbols, myths are constructed by synthesizing different texts and creating a single stereotyped narrative the main structural-semiotic elements of which are put in the centre of the analysis.

- Mythological narratives are composed around the events determined by a system of social perceptions. The situation is perceived as an event when it deviates from the ‘natural’ stream of everyday life reality or rejects its routine. Since different societies create different specifications of everyday life, the selection of events by myths lies at the crossroad of those sums of meanings that provide the natural perception of reality. In the Armenian society, for instance, the most fruitful ground for mythological narratives is the political reality, particularly those events that come about during elections. Hence, the majority of political myths tend to articulate whatever is going on inside political instances by associating the complexity of pre-election processes with such phenomena as gerrymander, corruption, interpersonal conflicts, etc.

- Another basic element is the mythological plot that is built by binding different events. In classical explanations, the plot is always hero-centred. In the mythological world, the plot’s development depends on two types of heroes that represent the *significant others and the significant us*. Intents and tasks of the heroes appear at the beginning of the plot and the results come up at the end. The cyclic development of mythological plots puts several obstacles on the hero's way to victory. Goal, obstacles and victory are those elements that define the action of mythological heroes. Moreover,

myth *does* combine both etiological (future-oriented) and causal (retrospective) bases of narratives. That is to say, in mythological time and space the past and the future are tied within a single semantic line. Hence, two types of mythological heroes can be defined: in retrospective narratives mainly passive heroes are presented, as the events are structured from sequence to cause (Makarov, 2003). Etiological myths have the active hero who crosses the semantic border and whose actions serve for binding the events.

- Mythological narratives have their own linguistic structures: the words and expressions that create certain semantic space. Myth anchors names to phenomena, thus shifting from the world of words to the world of symbols. In other words, the process of naming takes on the same features as the process of symbolization. Dialectic relations between name and subject/object help the name to be understood as a mythological symbol. Name is the element of answers searching mechanisms; it has to be attached to a symbol in order to make the process of social witchery come true. Hence, language is a part of mythological reality that is described by polysemantic expressions. The more polysemantic is the language, the larger is the scale of word's sub-textual meaning usage and the higher is the capability of reality's mythification. Mythological language uses three meta-models to present the reality according to its semantics: 1. Alienation - some aspects of reality just disappear from the whole portrait. 2. Distortion - gives more value to some aspects of life and minimizes the value of others. 3. Generalization - the typologies of phenomena are used against the background of elements of social reality.

- The final and the crucial elements of this methodology are driven from the sub-textual contradistinctions brought up by mythological and non-mythological realities. If we go back to Barthes' statements, it will be clear that myth subsumes the second order of signification to construct global sign. The connotative meaning is assumed through specific cultural knowledge of the sign, and cultural knowledge is carried through the specificity of the relationship between the expression and the content. But the concept itself shapes the signifier by putting there new sub-textual elements (heroes, events, etc). Myth's semantic space is abstracted from reality to some degree. In order to structure this abstraction we suggest distinguishing three levels. The highest level is the contradistinction between *real and unreal*. The middle level contradistinction takes place between the semantic poles of *possible/impossible, actual/not actual*. The lowest level takes place between routine semantics of everyday life, such as *kind/wicked, good/bad, alive/dead*, etc. The elements of a subtext can be presented by the chain of propositions consisting in forms and concepts, and in the relations between them. The associative degree of form-concept relations depends on the intention of their activation. Within the frameworks of myth, we need to focus not only on internal subtext (that has some semiotic feature and is described by means of inferences, implications, etc.) but also on the external meta-semiotic subtext - those structures of discourse that extend the system of knowledge, providing the significance of expressions without being a part of that significance.

Hence, the semantic elements of a myth's subtext are phenomenological axes. The subtext is the phenomenological projection of a communicative situation and of a general stock of knowledge on reality. Myth is livened up when its subtext is perceived. Furthermore, the subtext is not given *a priori*; it is built through all along constructing and transforming the process of knowledge. Semantic elements of myth provide the knowledge of each other starting from the one that is most determined to the less determined ones.

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ԱՆՆԱ ՓՈՒՍՐԱՐՅԱՆ, ՆՎԱՐԴ ՄԵԼՔՈՆՅԱՆ - Կառուցվածքային-նշանագիտական վերլուծությունը՝ ժամանակակից սոցիալական առասպելների ապակողավորման միջոց - Հոդվածը նվիրված է ժամանակակից առասպելների ուսումնասիրման մեթոդաբանական հնարավորություններին կառուցվածքային-նշանագիտական վերլուծության համատեքստում: Հոդվածում մանրամասն քննարկվում են առօրյա իրականության կառուցակցման և պահպանման սոցիալական մեխանիզմները, «առասպելական իրականության» ապակողավորման նշանագիտական կառուցվածքները, ինչպես նաև բացահայտվում են առասպելների՝ որպես յուրահատուկ սոցիալ-մշակութային տեքստերի այն առանցքային իմաստային միավորները, որոնք կարող են հիմք ծառայել առասպելների տարբեր դրսևորումների ուսումնասիրման համար:

АННА ПОХСРАЯН, НВАРД МЕЛКОНЯН – Структурно-семиологический анализ как способ декодирования современных социальных мифов. – Статья посвящена методологическим возможностям изучения современных мифов в контексте структурно-семиологического анализа. Подробно рассматриваются социальные механизмы конструирования и сохранения повседневной реальности, а также семиологические структуры декодирования «мифологической реальности». Авторы видят в мифах особые социально-культурные тексты и выявляют те их базовые смысловые единицы, которые могут послужить основой для изучения различных проявлений мифов.