

**Against Barthes**  
**Presentation**

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Volume 39, numéro 3, 2019

Contre Barthes. Tome I  
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URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094386ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094386ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (imprimé)

1923-9920 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Gefen, A. (2019). Against Barthes: Presentation. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 39(3), 5–6. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094386ar>

# Against Barthes

Presentation : Alexandre Gefen

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The 20th anniversary of the death of Roland Barthes in the year 2000 saw him consecrated as a major figure in France's cultural pantheon, and the centenary of his birth in 2015 brought with it a host of tributes : the adjective "Barthesian" became commonplace; texts were republished; numerous conferences were held, from China to the Amazon; and there appeared extensive biographies, websites, a dedicated journal, an exhibition and even a postage stamp. An entire mythology came into being. From the austere structuralist Barthes to the poignant and romantic "second Barthes," literary and more broadly critical studies, along with contemporary artistic creation, declared themselves to be the product of a Barthes put to use to think about failed love affairs and social media, self-fiction and texts on grieving, political semiotics and cinema, cultural studies and the question of realism.

This reverence sometimes eclipses all discussion : does Barthesian thought, recuperated equally as modern and as anti-modern, invoked equally by semiotics and by sceptical philosophy, really give rise to consensus? Although the Barthesian discourse was violently polemical on more than one front, and although his style was difficult to say the least, and his theoretical options radical, his very peculiar choices with respect to the works he chose to investigate and his political commitments, or silences, raise questions, and it is incumbent on us to continue to question Barthes' legacy in the wake of Jean-Marie Scaeffler's fine *Lettre à Roland Barthes* and the formidable biography by Tiphaine Samoyault.

This issue of *Semiotic Inquiry* seeks to pull Barthes, himself a ready fighter, from the dangers of intellectual anomie and moral hagiography. Admiring Barthes also requires one to think counter to Barthes and to discuss his work in order to take stock of its intensity, whether one is revisiting the polemics with literary history opened up by the New Criticism adventure, contesting the theoretical heritage of semiotics, reflecting on Barthes' contradictions and bad faith, debating the vocabulary of his work or its ideological assumptions, or analysing its relevance or obsolescence in contemporary debates in an age of culture wars and the return of narrative. It is also a matter of understanding that the uses to which Barthes is put are not neutral: to each one's tastes in Barthes,

because to be *against* Barthes, to stand counter to Barthes, to draw authority from him, to take one's pick between Barthes the orthodox structuralist and Barthes the dilettante essayist, is to make critical and political choices, to champion forms, critical styles and powerful epistemological options, to carry out translations and risk betrayals.

To compare the ideas of Barthes with those of Bruno Latour, as Alexandru Matei does in this issue, to interpret the critic's romantic mythologizing as Zvezdana Ostojic and Louis Rouquayrol offer to do, to inquire into the concept of a *new life* with Jennifer Rushworth, to reflect on the uses of sociology in Barthes' *Mythologies* as Andy Stafford has undertaken to do, to set out to formulate a true critique of Barthesian criticism as Pierre Vinclair outlines here, to understand Barthes' semiotics and its ways of deciphering in light of contemporary social overexposure as Gaëtan Brulotte proposes, to inquire into the recourse to literature as interpretive matrix in a posthumous article by Roland Le Huenen, who passed away in September 2020, is to challenge the monument in order to better open up discussion and pay tribute to Barthes by discussing him.

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