

## Today Roland Barthes is Dead: Killing the Body of Theory in The Seventh Function of Language by Laurent Binet

Zvezdana Ostojic

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Résumé de l'article

Le 25 février 1980, devant le Collège de France, un accident de la circulation emporte une victime dont le nom n'est pas inconnu : il s'agit du célèbre sémiologue et critique littéraire Roland Barthes. était-ce un simple accident ou une tentative d'assassinat ? Dans une investigation policière abracadabrante où se brisent les frontières entre réalité et fiction, le commissaire Jacques Bayard et son assistant, un jeune sémiologue Simon Herzog, prouveront que Roland Barthes a bel et bien été tué car il était en possession d'un mystérieux manuscrit sur la septième fonction du langage.

Cet article vise à montrer les divers mécanismes que Laurent Binet adopte afin de problématiser le mythe qui s'est formé autour de la vie et de l'oeuvre de Roland Barthes. En mettant en scène le meurtre fictif de Barthes, Binet liquide le monument canonique de la *French Theory* via l'intervention *lowbrow* du roman policier. En tuant Roland Barthes, la figure tutélaire de la sémiologie moderne, Binet questionne les limites et les potentialités de l'héritage de Barthes au cours de la présente ère post poststructuraliste lorsque les théoriciens sont de plus en plus assimilés à la culture populaire, tout en étant fétichisés au sein des chambres d'écho académiques fermées. Binet adopte le genre du roman populaire pour suivre les pas de Barthes dans le démantèlement d'un des mythes de la société bourgeoise - celui du canon de la *Haute Théorie*. Enfin, cet article montre que le roman de Binet représente une tentative de réanimer Barthes et la *French Theory* en resituant leurs textes dans le domaine du populaire, du matériel et de l'accessible.

# Today Roland Barthes is Dead: Killing the Body of Theory in The Seventh Function of Language by Laurent Binet

Zvezdana Ostojic  
Johns Hopkins University

*Le livre fait le sens, le sens fait la vie.* - Barthes (1973 : 51)

*La vie n'est pas un roman. C'est du moins ce que vous voudriez croire.* - Binet (2015: 11)

On February 25, 1980, in front of the Collège de France in Paris, the acclaimed semiotician and literary critic Roland Barthes was hit by a laundry van as he was returning home from lunch with the former socialist presidential candidate, François Mitterrand. Barthes died at the hospital a month later at the age of sixty-four. The extraordinary coincidences linked to Barthes's death are undeniable : Barthes, who wrote extensively about cars and fashion, was hit by a laundry van; Barthes, who spent his career on the margins of and within academia, died as he was crossing the *Rue des Écoles*, right in front of the Collège de France where he was chair of "Sémiologie Littéraire" from 1977.<sup>1</sup> Talk about symbolism! In his intellectual thriller,<sup>2</sup> *La septième fonction du langage* (2015), Laurent Binet seizes on this curious set of circumstances surrounding Barthes's death and wonders what if it was not an accident but rather a case of a premeditated murder? This is the question that drives the ludicrous murder investigation led by the conservative, streetwise superintendent, Jacques Bayard, and his assistant, a young leftist Ph.D. candidate in semiology who shares his initials with Sherlock Holmes, Simon Herzog. A lengthy, farcical investigation filled with humor, action, car chases, sarcasm,<sup>3</sup> and unexpected twists leads Bayard and Herzog to prove that Roland Barthes was indeed killed because he was in the possession of a mysterious and

powerful manuscript on the seventh function of language.<sup>4</sup> Binet's novel features many tutelary critics and intellectuals of the 1980s, including Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, John Searle, Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, and others. All of them appear as suspects to Jacques Bayard, the police intelligence superintendent assigned to the case by the sitting president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Bayard and his assistant Herzog embark on a quest for Barthes's murderer and for the document of crucial importance for national security, whose magical value resides in the fact that the one who possesses it can convince anyone of anything.

This article aims to show how Laurent Binet problematizes in *La septième fonction du langage* the myth that has been formed around the work and life of Roland Barthes. I argue that, by staging Barthes's fictional murder, Binet liquidates the canonical monument of French Theory via the lowbrow intervention of the detective story.<sup>5</sup> Instead of taking on such academic figures from above, Binet works from below. By killing off Roland Barthes, a tutelary figure of modern semiology, Binet questions the ways in which an entire intertextual memory has been formed over the course of the century. What are the limits and potentialities of Roland Barthes's legacy in today's poststructuralist era<sup>6</sup> when, on the one hand, theorists and canonical writers are being increasingly assimilated into popular culture, while also being fetishized and mythologized within the closed academic eco-chambers on the other? Binet adopts a popular genre to follow Barthes's steps in dismantling yet another one of the bourgeois myths – the Canon of High Theory.<sup>7</sup> By developing a series of equivalencies between text and crime that identify the body of the text with the corpse, the creator with the killer, the murder with the impulse of (re)creation, the critical discourse with the triggering of murderous instincts, and the police investigation with semiological decryption, this article shows that Laurent Binet symbolically puts to death the heritage of French Theory, in order to be able to better assume his own voice within a literary and critical institution understood as a field of dominant and dominated forces. However, by disfiguring the great classic that appears to be fixed within the history of philosophy and literary criticism, Binet destabilizes the sacred status of the canonical monument without devaluing the work of Barthes which he rather revitalizes by extracting it from the realm of mythology.

## The Myth of Roland Barthes

*La mort est d'une autre importance : elle irrealise  
la signature de l'auteur et fait de l'oeuvre un mythe.*  
- Barthes (1966 : 58)

In *La septième fonction du langage* Laurent Binet exposes how the French Theory and Roland Barthes's writings and persona have migrated from the restricted scholarly milieus into the arena of popular literature and detective novels. Even during his life, but certainly after his death, Barthes has been transformed into that which he tried to dismantle throughout his career: a modern myth. Some critics would argue that in Barthes's case the death of the man coincided with the death of the author, since the interest in structuralism and poststructuralism diminished in the 1980s. However, others like Charles J. Stivale would argue that Barthes continued to spark interest among scholars regardless.<sup>8</sup> According to Culler, Barthes the author did die, but he was subsequently resurrected into a multi-purpose, play-doh-like figure<sup>9</sup> whose texts continue to be quoted, appropriated, and re-interpreted in a broad range of contexts : "Barthes almost vanished from the scene for a while but is now coming back strong, not as the structuralist but as [...] a Walter-Benjamin-like figure who offers suggestive thoughts about all manner of things, from the *Mythologies* of everyday life to photography" (2014 : 10). Since the 1970s, Barthes is no longer a singular figure. Rather, there are two Barthes, the French and the American one :<sup>10</sup> "The Anglo-American Barthes began as his own contemporary and passed a period of retrospective appreciation, to finally become, once again, nearly the contemporary of his French counterpart" (Bruss 1982 : 367). French Theory in America became truly a matter of fashion,<sup>11</sup> academic prestige, and marketability,<sup>12</sup> or as Jean-Philippe Mathy would argue : "the rapid institutionalization of poststructuralism in American departments of French, English, and Comparative literature was facilitated by a large (as compared to France) population of students in the humanities, who guaranteed a market for the translation and publication of works in French theory" (2000: 336). English translations of Barthes's texts are, according to Bruss, treated as objects of desire :<sup>13</sup> "In Barthes's later excursions into the discourse of desire, the relation of the obsessed lover to his (imagined) love-object bears a curious resemblance to the relation between the Anglo-American audience and the wandering, translated text" (1982 : 368). In academic circles Barthes is not merely a signifier, but has become a proper sign system, as the erudite-sounding adjective "barthesian" is synonymous with scholarly prestige and operates as a hard-earned academic title.<sup>14</sup> Peter Bennett recognizes the mythological aura that has formed around Barthes and admits that he has become "a form of speech, a mode of signification [...] Barthes, like 'myth', is semiological" (2013 : 145). In the decades following Barthes's death,<sup>15</sup> his texts, like a dead body, were embalmed by the critics, who tried to preserve them from decay by creating a series of myths. Consequently, a number of barthesian myths emerged from a narrative of his life in stages, as identified by Elizabeth W. Bruss :

from his first appearance as an upstart intruder to his decline into an aging and outmoded writer, struggling to keep up with newer trends. Or (in another version) a writer who grew embarrassed and unsure and began to betray his own best work, or (in another version still) matured to the point where he could disdain the changing whims of fashion and write solely for himself. (1982: 367)

The paradox of Roland Barthes is that the death of the author quickly gave rise to a myth of the author.<sup>16</sup> Though he was one of the leading critics of mass consumer culture, the myth of Barthes was, ironically, manipulated for marketing purposes<sup>17</sup>

in order to increase the sales of books : “Indeed, the now fixed habit of marketing his books beneath an imposing cover picture of the author makes Barthes even more the star – a frozen and phantasmatic face, curiously (now cruelly) removed from time and change” (Bruss 1982 : 368). In *La septième fonction du langage*, Binet does not succumb to this vogue, but rather subverts it by putting a picture of Barthes’s face on the cover of his book, blurred to the point of unrecognizability, almost completely erased. Binet thereby dismantles the transformation of Barthes into a mere image.<sup>18</sup>

## Roland Barthes, the Protagonist

*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.* - Barthes 1995 : 1

Apart from adorning book covers, Barthes’s sacred protean body has taken on many forms over the course of the century: he embodies the materialist Marxist, the underdog combative journalist at the margins of academia, the fervent critic of traditions and institutions, the literary and cultural critic, the overtly formalist and detached aesthete, the novelist wannabe, the friend and advisor of politicians.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he has migrated from the field of theory and literary criticism into the realm of novels, himself becoming a literary character. The novelization of Roland was inaugurated by Barthes himself, with his literary self-representation in *Roland Barthes*.<sup>20</sup> According to Wasserman, by signing *Roland Barthes*, Barthes’s fusion of his body with his text<sup>21</sup> resulted in the emergence of “two Barthes : one is the subject who wrote this book, its author; the other, we must say, is both the object of *this* Barthes’s study (appearing at a variety of pronominal ‘persons’ or as ‘R.B.’) and also the subject (or subjects) of the texts that the first Barthes ‘reads’ in order to *rewrite*... he is what we have now learned to be the ‘textual body.’” (1981: 111). The trend of novelizing Roland Barthes was carried forward by several other publications which elected to stage Barthes’s portraits in a remarkably literary fashion or to feature him as a protagonist. These publications participate in what Jean-Pierre Richard defined as *rolandisme*, and include Thomas Clerc’s *L’homme qui tua Roland Barthes et autres nouvelles*, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Pourquoi j’aime Barthes*, Jorge Volpi Escalante’s *La fin de la folie*, Jean Esponde’s *Roland Barthes, un été* (Urt 1978), Patrick Mauri s’s *Roland Barthes, au fil du temps*, Julia Kristeva’s *Les Samourais*, Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s *Lettre à Roland Barthes*, Hervé Algalarrondo’s *Les derniers jours de Roland B.*, to name a few.

## The Body of the Author

In *La septième fonction du langage*, Roland Barthes, the esteemed intellectual, is not represented as a timeless entity, but rather as a mortal, vulnerable body. *La septième fonction du langage* opens with a depiction of the intellectual lost in

thought, blind to the material reality that surrounds him : “*C’est un peu comme l’allégorie de la caverne à l’envers : le monde des idées dans lequel il s’est enfermé obscurcit sa perception du monde sensible. Autour de lui, il ne voit que des ombres*” (Binet 2015 : 12, 13). This description is followed by the dramatic account of his body being crushed by a van and the pensive Barthes immediately transforms into a being of flesh, ephemeral and vulnerable, a body with a blood type (“*Il faudrait connaître son groupe sanguin*”), one which resembles an inanimate doll : “*Son corps produit le son mat, caractéristique, horrible, de la chair qui heurte la tôle, et va rouler sur la chaussée comme une poupée de chiffon*” (Binet 2015 : 13, 16). At the hospital, Barthes appears completely helpless and fragile (“*le tube enfoncé dans la gorge, les hématomes au visage, le regard triste*”) (Binet 2015 : 22). His half nude body is weak and destitute : “*Le grand critique gît par terre, désintubé, tous ses fils arrachés, sa tunique d’hôpital fine comme du papier dévoilant ses fesses molles*” (Binet 2015: 67). The author is dying, quite literally : “*Roland Barthes gît dans le caniveau, inerte, mais un sifflement rauque échappe de son corps*” (Binet 2015 : 15). The accident was so severe that Barthes has lost the capacity to speak. His body is reduced to basic functions, all he can do is nod for yes and no. The author who has spent his life writing about language thus becomes mute, and his body becomes a sign : “*Vous vous rendez sur votre lieu de travail lorsque le véhicule vous a percuté, c’est bien ça?’ Barthes fait oui*” (Binet 2015 : 23).

Foucault is another untouchable figure in the canon of French theory that Binet reduces to a physical body. Foucault’s body is one that abandons itself to sexual pleasures, as is vividly depicted when Bayard and Herzog visit a gay sauna to question Foucault about Barthes’s death.<sup>22</sup> The language of the crime novel, in this sense, stands in contrast with the discourse of a critical text : the detective genre is marked by a strong presence of the body, of organic and putrid substances, a cadaver being one of the crucial elements of a detective story. By placing the intellectuals in a physical body, Binet puts the theory back into the material, concrete, and popular realm, where Barthes left it in his *Mythologies*.

The opposition between the language of the mind and body, as well as the usage of intellectual jargon in mundane, corporeal, and eroticized spaces emphasize the intimate connection between the pleasures of the body and the pleasures of theory, or of text, as Barthes would have it. The erotic pleasure that Foucault experiences in seeing Bayard’s “*muscles répressifs dans un lieu de biopouvoir*” is closely connected to his pleasure of philosophizing about this encounter (Binet 2015 : 62). Furthermore, the reader is not exempt from the pleasure of text either; given that, traditionally, through the final resolution of the murder, the epilogue of a detective novel is intended to provide the gratification to the reader. Foucault’s speech collides with the language of the body, and vice versa. The academic discourse pervades the corporeal sphere, creating a resonance of seemingly irreconcilable realms, staged through the auditive juxtaposition of pleasurable moaning heard from the backrooms in the sauna and Foucault’s voice :

Michel Foucault interroge Bayard : ‘Comment trouvez-vous cet endroit commissaire?’  
Bayard ne répond rien, on entend juste l’écho des backrooms : ‘Han! Han!’ Foucault : ‘Vous êtes venu pour chercher quelqu’un mais vous l’avez déjà trouvé, à ce qu’il me semble.’ Il désigne Simon Herzog en riant : ‘Votre Alcibiade!’ Les backrooms : ‘Han ! Han !’ Bayard :

'Je cherche quelqu'un qui a vu Roland Barthes peu de temps avant son accident.' Foucault, caressant la tête du jeune homme qui s'affaire entre ses jambes : 'Roland Barthes avait un secret, vous savez...' Bayard demande lequel. Les backrooms ahantent de plus en plus fort. (Binet 2015 : 63)

In Foucault's case the pleasures of the body and of the mind are indiscernible, while philosophical contemplation is compared to oral sex : "*Foucault renverse la tête en arrière en fermant les yeux, sans que Bayard ni Herzog puissent déterminer s'il s'abandonne au plaisir ou s'il réfléchit*" (Binet 2015 : 64).

This connection of the corporeal and the cerebral is especially emphasized in the invention of the Logos Club, a secret society where intellectuals debate on various subjects. Herzog and Bayard try to infiltrate the club because they suspect that one of the members is the murderer. The Logos Club has one rule : the failure to vanquish one's opponent in an oratory duel results in bodily amputation. Logos (word, speech, or discourse in Greek) is thus the aggressor : linguistic virtuosity, or lack thereof, is the instigator of bodily violence. Simon compares the oratory jousts that are performed in the Logos Club to sword duels : "*Une joute oratoire se rapproche plus d'un duel à l'épée. On se découvre, on referme sa garde, on se dérobe, on feinte, on coupe, on dégage, on pare, on riposte*" (Binet 2015 : 377).

Furthermore, Binet gives his characters not only a body, but also a voice. More than simply a neutral, disembodied voice of the critic whose text is quoted, it is a voice that has a color and a melody. Before meeting Foucault, Bayard goes to the courtyard of the Collège de France to hear one of Foucault's lectures being diffused over the loud speakers : "*Bayard écoute sans comprendre, se laisse bercer par le ton à la fois didactique et porté, mélodieux dans son genre, soutenu par un sens de la mesure, des silences et de ponctuation très maîtrisée*" (Binet 2015 : 27). The authors who appear in *La septième fonction du langage* are far from dead. Binet injects life in the inanimate and discarnate names of the French Theory, by giving them vulnerable or sexualized bodies and distinct voices. It is through these strategies of embodiment that Binet manages to remove the tutelary intellectual figures of French Theory from the realm of the untouchable and abstract and to let them enjoy the pleasures and tyrannies of the body and of the text.

## Antagonistic Polyphony

Exactly one hundred years after Roland Barthes's birth, Binet decides to offer in *La septième fonction du langage* a different perspective on his death. It is through the subversive confrontation of the detective genre and the theoretical discourse, the frictions and coexistence of theory and the popular language, that Binet manages to problematize the myth that has been created around Roland Barthes and, by extension, around French Theory. The constant synchronicity of different and sometimes antithetical registers dominates the narrative structure of *La septième fonction du langage*. The discourses of the right-wing superintendent and the humanities Ph.D. student are opposed within the duo of the two main protagonists : Jacques Bayard and Simon Herzog. Moreover, many concepts issued from the fields of linguistics, semiology, and French theory are introduced and superficially explained by Herzog to the ignorant and confused Bayard. However, these concepts, evoked either

by Herzog or by other theorists who have speaking roles in the novel, stay on the surface, either as a pun or as metonymical associations to a certain thinker. Concepts are therefore turned into signifiers of a certain intellectual milieu in which they are being normalized for everyday conversations.<sup>23</sup>

The cohabitation of the academic and vulgar language that subverts the excessive formalism of theory is especially evident when Bayard encounters the world of theory for the first time : “*Bayard est déjà sûr d’une chose : ce n’est pas ici qu’on apprend un métier. Epistémè, mon cul*” (Binet 2015 : 28). Thrown into an investigation that involves the questioning of numerous intellectual figures (Foucault, Deleuze, Kristeva, Sollers, Derrida, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and others), Bayard finds himself in a system of signs that he cannot decode. Binet opposes the language of the police investigation which belongs to the realm of logic, deduction, and literal meaning to the figural language of metaphor and abstraction. Bayard’s inability to understand the references hinders him from solving the crime :

Le commissaire entre dans une librairie pour acheter des livres mais, comme il n’a pas l’habitude, il a du mal à s’orienter dans les rayonnages. Il ne trouve pas d’ouvrages de Raymond Picard. Le libraire, qui lui semble relativement au courant, lui signale au passage que Raymond Picard est mort, ce que Foucault n’avait pas cru bon de lui signaler. (Binet 2015: 31)

The enclosed nature of the bubble of intellectual discourse and the restricted audience of theoretical texts is revealed through Bayard’s comical and reactionary comments : “*Il sait bien pourtant que ce genre de livre ne s’adresse pas à lui, qu’il s’agit d’un livre pour intellos, pour que ces parasites d’intellos puissent rire entre eux*” (Binet 2015 : 33). Bayard is not very perceptive, his deciphering of exterior signs is reduced to simple and binary oppositions : “*Il y a des vieux biens habillés, des jeunes mal habillés, des vieux mal habillés, des jeunes bien habillés, des styles très variés, des cheveux longs et des cheveux courts, des individus de type maghrébin, plus d’hommes que femmes*” (Binet 2015 : 21). In the duo of ignorant Bayard and talented Herzog, Binet stages an encounter of police and academia, operating, through the investigating team, an institutional continuum, a joint regime of truth seeking. This encounter of two representatives of institutions of order and knowledge emphasizes the separation and isolation of academia and its inaccessible language: “sa piste débute rue des Écoles, devant le Collège de France (*institution dont il ignorait l’existence jusqu’à aujourd’hui et dont il n’a pas bien compris la nature*)” (Binet 2015 : 24-25). The difficulty — and even impossibility — of communication between two divergent semiotic systems is comically translated in Bayard’s complete confusion and inability to grasp the references

*Que savez-vous de la sémiologie? – Euh, c’est l’étude de la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale? Bayard repense à son Roland-Barthes sans peine. Il serre les dents. ‘Et en français ? – Mais... c’est la définition de Saussure... - Ce Chaussure, il connaît Barthes? – Euh, non, il est mort, c’est l’inventeur de la sémiologie. – Hm, je vois.’ Mais Bayard ne voit rien du tout.* (Binet 2015 : 44-45)

This confrontation of discourses collides humorously, but also violently, within the novel. Binet’s text is, in this sense, profoundly “barthesian” inasmuch as it represents a dense network of intertexts, “a multidimensional space in which a



variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 1977 : 146). This constant friction of opposing discourses exposes again the tyrannical nature of language,<sup>24</sup> the impossibility of finding a common language, and the inherent divisiveness imposed by the literary and critical institutions that Barthes so vehemently opposed.<sup>25</sup>

A number of intellectuals who appear as characters in *La septième fonction du langage* exploit the theoretical language *ad nauseam*, to the point of ridicule and nonsense. Their speech transforms into superficial name dropping, which is especially noticeable in the case of Philippe Sollers, whose portrait in *La septième fonction du langage* is one of the least flattering (apart from Bernard-Henri Lévy's):<sup>26</sup>

Imaginez-vous monsieur le représentant de l'ordre public, huf, huf, que Foucault m'avait lancé un ultimatum... 'Il faudra choisir entre Barthes et moi !... Autant choisir entre Montaigne et La Boétie... Entre Racine et Shakespeare... Entre Hugo et Balzac... entre Goethe et Schiller... Entre Marx et Engels... Entre Merckx et Poulidor... Entre Mao et L. nine... Entre Breton et Aragon... Entre Laurel et Hardy... Entre Sartre et Camus (euh, non, pas eux) ... Entre de Gaulle et Tixier-Vignancour... Entre le Plan et le March ... Entre Rocard et Mitterrand... Entre Giscard et Chirac. (Binet 2015 : 70-71)

The names that are usually associated with high literature and theory are now being exploited in the banal context of a ludicrous police investigation in which they are potential murder suspects :

*Est-ce que Barthes avait des ennemis? Oui, beaucoup, répond Sollers. Tout le monde sait qu'il est notre ami et nous avons beaucoup d'ennemis! Qui? Les staliniens! Les fascistes! Alain Badiou! Gilles Deleuze! Pierre Bourdieu! Cornelius Castoriadis! Pierre Vidal-Naquet! Euh, Hélène Cixou ! (BHL : Ah bon, elles sont fâchées, avec Julia? Sollers : Oui... non... elle est jalouse de Julia à cause de Marguerite...) Marguerite comment? Duras. Bayard note tous les noms. (Binet 2015 : 70)*

Barthes is not exempted from the mockery of impenetrable language either. As he is dying in the hospital, he is depicted as being unable to produce sensical language, and what is presented as the delirious gibberish of a dying man are direct quotes from S/Z. To Bayard's question of whether he saw his aggressor, Barthes responds incomprehensibly, further emphasizing the clash of the registers of the detective investigation and of Barthes's text :

*Le signifiant tuteur sera découpé en une suite de courts fragments contigus, qu'on appellera ici des lexies, puisque ce sont des unités de lecture. Ce découpage, il faut le dire, sera, on ne peut plus arbitraire; il n'impliquera aucune responsabilité méthodologique, puisqu'il portera sur le signifiant, alors que l'analyse proposée porte uniquement sur le signifié. (Binet 2015 : 71)*

This collision of the philosophical and the detective discourses is the most evident when Herzog and Bayard go to question Deleuze, whose answers are completely unusable for the investigation. On this occasion, Deleuze tries to summarize the metaphysical stakes of the quest for truth in a murder investigation :<sup>27</sup>

*Il n'est pas sûr que la question qu'est-ce que? soit une bonne question. Il se peut que des questions de type : qui? combien? comment? où? quand? soient meilleures... Comment déterminer parmi les prétendants lequel est le bon? Si vous avez le comment, vous aurez le pourquoi. Prenez les sophistes, par exemple : le problème, si on suit Platon,*

*c'est qu'ils prétendent à quelque chose auquel ils n'ont pas droit.* (Binet 2015: 77-78)<sup>28</sup>

Another example of the coexistence of opposing registers occurs when the song by Cure “Killing an Arab” echoes in the background of the party where Foucault has a discussion with Hervé Guibert. This song also anticipates the subsequent murder of Hamed, Barthes’s lover who had the dictated text on the seventh function of language taped on a voice recorder :

*Au centre du cercle qui s'est déjà formé autour d'eux, Foucault raconte une histoire au jeune Guibert, comme s'il n'avait pas noté l'effervescence que sa présence suscite, continuant une conversation entamée avant leur arrivée : ‘Quand j'étais petit, je voulais devenir un poisson rouge. Ma mère disait : ‘Mais enfin, mon lapin, ce n'est pas possible, tu détestes l'eau froide.’ La voix de Robert Smith dit : I'm the stranger! Foucault : ‘Cela me plongeait dans un abîme de perplexité, je lui disais : alors juste une toute petite seconde, j'aimerais tellement savoir à quoi il pense...’ Robert Smith : ... Killing an Arab!... Foucault : ‘Il faudra bien que quelqu'un l'avoue. Il y en a toujours un qui finit par avouer...’ Robert Smith : ... of the dead man on the beach.* (Binet 2015 : 88)

Foucault’s speech is continuously interrupted by the song; however, the two discourses are not in dialogue, but rather in conflict. The immediate juxtaposition of the discourses signals a violent invasion on Foucault’s speech, opposing two different languages (English and French), modalities (singing and speaking), and registers (popular music and the voice of the philosopher).

Such juxtapositions of register are so numerous that it would be virtually impossible to list them all in a single article. The text of *La septième fonction du langage* is continuously punctuated by multiple voices, employing a narrative strategy resembling what Bakhtin called polyphony, where a plurality of consciences speak independently of the author’s voice. The polyphony in Binet’s novel, however, goes beyond what Bakhtin conceptualized, appearing as a rather violent and antagonistic polyphony, given that the text is constantly punctuated by the subversive voices of popular culture that cannot be silenced. Binet creates a complex web of voices<sup>29</sup> : in the last example we cited, Foucault’s voice appears within the text of *La septième fonction du langage* where it is repeatedly interrupted by a song by the Cure which is, in turn, an intertextual reference to Camus’s *The Stranger*.

In an interview with Natalie Levisailles, Binet admitted that when he turned theorists and philosophers into literary characters, he did not intend to completely fictionalize them : “*la majorité des dialogues des personnages qui ont existé sont des montages de citations. C'est un exercice qui m'a beaucoup intéressé : redistribuer des bouts de textes écrits et les recombinaison pour faire des dialogues*” (2015). Almost everything the protagonists inspired by real people say is a direct quote from their writings which is then, as seen in the example above, constantly interrupted by other voices. This continual simultaneity of voices within Binet’s text, which is almost entirely made of intertexts, subverts the perception of the untouchable totality and fixity of a canonical text.<sup>30</sup>

## The Liberatory Carnival

This reversal of hierarchies that Binet operates through the juxtaposition of theoretical and popular — or formal and vulgar — discourses could be brought

into connection with the concept of the carnival as elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin defines the carnival as “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions... It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (1968 : 10). From this perspective, Binet’s novel can be read as a subversive disruption of the hierarchical and ideological structures of the canon of French Theory. Binet’s text is thus understood as a counter-tradition that creates an inverted textual space where high and low coexist since famous philosophers and critics are protagonists in a silly crime novel. By giving a body to the disembodied theorists, Binet’s text highlights the materiality of all that is spiritual or abstract, thereby resembling the carnival discourse which insists on corporeality. According to Bakhtin, the carnival performs the “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract... a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (1968 : 19). Finally, the carnivalesque imaginary understood as the liberation from authority and cessation of hierarchy, is especially notable in the episode of *La septième fonction du langage* in which Simon Herzog symbolically executes the author of the book in which he is a mere character. The connection to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque is made even more compelling by the inclusion of an entire chapter in Binet’s novel which is devoted to the carnival in Venice. In this episode, Bayard and Herzog go to Venice to participate in oratory jousts organized by the Logos Club, hoping that they will be able to identify the murderer and retrieve the document with the seventh function of language. Herzog is already increasingly suspicious about the outlandish events that they have experienced since their investigation began,<sup>31</sup> and he starts to wonder whether he is a character in a novel. The gifted semiologist that he is, during this episode in Venice, Herzog manages to decipher his role within the narrative economy. It is not a coincidence that he comes to this realization during the carnival, when masks symbolically fall. Herzog understands that he is the victim of a sadistic writer, and just as he starts to wonder whether or not he is the main character in this story, he is cornered by a group of masked hooligans :

*Simon réfléchit pendant qu’il recule : dans l’hypothèse où il serait vraiment un personnage de roman (hypothèse renforcée par la situation, les masques, les objets lourdement pittoresques : un roman qui n’aurait pas peur de manier les clichés, se dit-il), qu’est-ce qu’il risquerait vraiment? Un roman n’est pas un rêve : on peut mourir dans un roman. Ceci dit, normalement, on ne tue pas le personnage principal, sauf, éventuellement à la fin de l’histoire. (Binet 2015 : 382)*

After he is miraculously saved by two Japanese men, his “*deux mystérieux anges gardiens*”, Herzog becomes entirely conscious of his ontological status (Binet 2015 : 383). He then turns into the revolted protagonist who tries to emancipate himself from his sadistic creator and potential destructor. By the end, Herzog manages to liberate himself from the hold of his writer by simply saying “I”, thereby symbolically killing his author : “*Si ça se trouve, la fin est entre les mains de son personnage, et ce personnage, c’est moi. Je suis Simon Herzog. Je suis le héros de ma propre histoire*” (Binet 2015 : 476). By adopting the first-person narration, Herzog executes the performative function of language, when saying is

doing. In appropriating the use of language and performing the birth of his own subjectivity, he liberates himself from the claws of his ruthless creator.<sup>32</sup> Simon thus embodies, in a sense, the seventh function of language by asserting that he is the hero of his own story. Binet's novel thus ends with a double authorial homicide : first, that of Roland Barthes, then that of the author of the novel. We, as readers, serve as the sole accomplices of these crimes.

## The Power of Language

The novel ends with Herzog and Bayard's realization that Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers murdered Barthes so that Sollers could use the seventh function of language to become the eternal master of the Logos Club. Subsequently, they discover that François Mitterrand has managed to seize the seventh function of language, guaranteeing him the victory in the 1981 presidential election. The language of theory is thus appropriated by political leaders in order to secure electoral victories.

The novel ends with a failure – that of the intellectual. Neither Sollers and Kristeva, the cunning and ruthless academics capable of any atrocity in order to earn peer recognition and advance their careers, nor Simon Herzog, the curious and gifted semiotician, manage to get their hands on the mysterious manuscript on the seventh function of language. This failure marks the loss of the radical intellectual's power and the transfer of the power of language to the political sphere. Once in the hands of François Mitterrand, the seventh function of language is responsible for his victory in the presidential election, as it will be, Binet suggests, for Obama's win in 2008. The language of intellectuals remains infertile, its reach limited to a closed echo chamber<sup>33</sup> of like-minded thinkers. The real power of the spoken and written word resides elsewhere – in the hands of politicians. This failure of the intellectual announces the impending decline of theory in the mid-1990s<sup>34</sup>. The transfer of the power of language from the popular and accessible realm to that of the abstract and detached is also epitomized in the shift in Barthes's writings from the engaged, transformative discourse of the *Mythologies* to the increasingly more apolitical and aestheticized texts. Barthes became a part of the intellectual canon. The consecration of his texts has transformed them into myths, cementing them and thus stripping them of their transformative power. Binet's postmodern novel is an attempt to reanimate Barthes and French Theory by resituating their writings in the realm of the popular, material, and accessible.

## Notes

1. Barthes gave a series of lectures at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1980. They were all published posthumously (*Le Neutre* [2002], *Comment vivre ensemble* [2002], and *La préparation du roman I et II* [2003]).
2. Umberto Eco, the author of intellectual thrillers such as *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), is an evident inspiration for Binet's novel. He also appears as an important protagonist in *La septième fonction du langage*.
3. Much like Barthes, Binet lives "to the full contradiction of [his] time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth" (Barthes 1972 : 12).
4. The seventh function is an imaginary addition to Roman Jakobson's six functions of language,

- namely the referential, poetic, emotive, conative, phatic, and metalingual functions (Jakobson 1995 : 73).
5. From the very beginning of the novel Barthes's grandeur is imposing. He is "*Le plus grand critique littéraire du XXe siècle*", a god-like author whose *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* are "*la bible des moins de vingt-cinq ans*" (Binet 2015 : 11). Just as he was about to "*prendre la place qui lui revient au panthéon des écrivains*", he was struck and killed by a laundry van (Binet 2015 : 11).
  6. See Tiphaine Samoyaut's review of Binet's novel : "*Il peut paraître grotesque pour qui voudrait y voir une représentation fidèle de ce que fut le milieu intellectuel de la fin des années 1970, mais il est beaucoup plus pertinent si on y lit une réflexion sur notre propre milieu aujourd'hui, sur ce que nous avons fait de cet héritage : tout en le muséifiant (le grand parc d'attractions de la French Theory), on n'a pas craint de le dévoyer au service, au mieux, de l'autopromotion et, au pire, du consentement aux pressions médiatiques ne proposant plus que des images négatives et la destruction de toute communauté politique*" (Kritov 2015).
  7. In an interview with Lea Richard, Binet admitted : "Following in Barthes' footsteps, I wanted to play with their myths, their legends. I'm not really concerned with what Eco or Sollers were actually like, I just wanted to play with their public images" (2017).
  8. For a detailed report on the publications of Barthes's work after his death, see Stivale (2002), footnote 2.
  9. Elizabeth W. Bruss notes that Barthes has become "a malleable figure that one could twist into any number of different and aesthetically arresting poses – tragic, heroic, or laconic – at will" (1982 : 368).
  10. Even more so than in France, Barthes's popularity on American campuses, and especially in the humanities departments, has been undeniable since the 1970s. See François Cusset, *French Theory : How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* : "The Pleasure of Text, which was an academic best seller in the United States in the 1970s, was read as a postmodern prophecy, the allegory of a 'textualization' of the world, in marked contrast to the 'pleasure' in question" (2008 : 285).
  11. This is another of Barthes's paradoxes, since he devoted many of his texts to dismantling the scholarly trends.
  12. French Theory across the Atlantic is an important theme in *La septième fonction du langage* which has an entire chapter set in a conference at Cornell University. This conference ends with yet another victim in the pursuit for the seventh function of language : Jacques Derrida is killed by dogs in reminiscence of Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.
  13. The text as objectified Other is closely related to Barthes's conception of the lovers' discourse : "To expend oneself, to bestir oneself for an impenetrable object is pure religion. To make the other into an insoluble riddle on which my life depends is to consecrate the other as a god; I shall never manage to solve the question the other asks me, the lover is not OEdipus. Then all that is left for me to do is to reverse my ignorance into truth. It is not true that the more you love, the better you understand; all that the action of love obtains from me is merely this wisdom: that the other is not to be known; his opacity is not the screen around a secret, but, instead, a kind of evidence in which the game of reality and appearance is done away with. I am seized with that exaltation of loving someone unknown, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse : I know what I do not know" (Barthes 2010 : 135).
  14. See Bennett and McDougall in Barthes' *Mythologies Today : Readings of Contemporary Culture* : "What is Barthes today? Barthes is a form of speech, a mode of signification. To earn the qualifier 'Barthesian'... is to be defined not by object or material but by a signifying consciousness" (2013: 145). See also *Beautiful Theories – The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* by Elizabeth W. Bruss who focuses on two figures that marked the theoretical discourse – Roland Barthes and Harold Bloom. Bruss notes that "Bloom and Barthes are, for example, system builders, almost notorious for introducing their own complicated postulates, that together constitute a theoretical machine that will (ideally) outlast any immediate application. Thus, there are 'Barthesian' and 'Bloomian' analyses – and anti-Barthesian and anti-Bloomian" (1982 : 283).

15. See Roland Barthes, *Phenomenon and Myth : An Intellectual Biography* by Andy Stafford: "there is no more powerful constructor of 'myth' than a posthumous account, if only because there is no chance for the subject to reply. Furthermore, important work on Barthes, both in France and outside, has taken place since his death" (1998 : 6).
16. See Jean-Marie Schaeffer who opposes this mythologization of Barthes in his *La Lettre Roland Barthes : "Exiger, sinon une identité de vue, du moins une évolution cohérente (c'est-à-dire facilement intelligible par le lecteur) des différents ouvrages d'un écrivain, c'est précisément exiger de l'individu qui écrit qu'il accepte la loi d'un télos unique, celui de la figure de l'auteur reconstructible 'post-mortem', figure de l'auteur comme père de ce qui s'est écrit en lui et a été publié sous son nom"* (2015 : 60).
17. "The market value of the name of Roland Barthes has preserved the myth of authorship ten years after Barthes himself was proclaimed to be defunct." (1982 : 379).
18. The mythologization of Roland Barthes has created an image of him, an anxiety that Barthes himself felt as he was writing his 'biographemes': "You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you); even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to a repertoire of images." (Barthes 1995 : 36).
19. See for example Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth, An Intellectual Biography*. Stafford identifies three stages in Barthes's intellectual career : Barthes the journalist, the academic, and the novelist.
20. According to Andy Stafford, it is the very non-linear form that Barthes adopted to write his biographemes that contributed to the mythologization of his life: "Barthes's favored approach, the 'biographeme' technique of presenting 'fragments' (rather than a linear narrative), has led to a romanticized picture. The 'myth' has, in many ways, overtaken the 'phenomenon' in Barthesian studies (if 'Barthesian studies' is not a contradiction in terms)" (1998 : 6-7).
21. A similar fusion happens in *La septième fonction du langage*. Barthes is slowly falling into coma, and his thoughts are exact quotes from *Critique et vérité*, suggesting Barthes's complete blending with his text : "*Les Français s'enorgueillissent inlassablement d'avoir eu leur Racine (l'homme aux deux mille mots) et ne se plaignent jamais de n'avoir pas eu leur Shakespeare*" (Binet 2015 : 94).
22. Ironically, Foucault appears as a literary character within a genre that, in its traditional forms, could be said to belong to what he terms in *Discipline and Punish* as 'disciplinary society'.
23. Binet's novel is similar to what Mitchum Huehls defines as "theory novels" : "the theory in theory novels – dropped names, digestible concepts, a limited number of primary texts – is mostly theory as synecdoche" (2015 : 285).
24. See Barthes's view on the oppressive nature of language : "But language – the performance of a language system – is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist. Once uttered, even in the subject's deepest privacy, speech enters the service of power" (Barthes 1979 : 5).
25. See Terry Eagleton's analysis of *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* in *Literary Theory, an Introduction* : "There is no doubt that the 'guilt' of which Barthes speaks is the guilt of the institution of Literature itself - an institution which, as he comments, testifies to the division of languages and the division of classes. To write in a 'literary' way, in modern society, is inevitably to collude with such divisiveness" (2011: 122).
26. "*Difficile d'imaginer ce que pense Kristeva de Sollers en 1980. Que son dandysme histrionique, son libertinage so French, sa vantardise pathologique, son style de pamphlétaire ado et sa culture épate-bourgeois aient pu séduire la petite Bulgare fraîchement débarquée d'Europe orientale, dans les années 60, admettons*" (Binet 2015 : 152).
27. In an interview with Lea Richard, Laurent Binet explained : "Barthes was a semiotician ... and I thought that, in a way, semiotics is the science of investigation, the science of Sherlock Holmes... And so I thought that maybe I could use that very academic science for something very concrete : a detective investigation" (2017).
28. Though the connection between crime fiction and semiology is compelling, the detective genre appears in some respects to be the opposite of semiotics. It is a genre of accuracy,

- causality, and logical conviction, aiming to dispel ambiguity and restore clarity rather than to investigate complex meanings. According to Moretti, the criminal creates “a situation of semantic ambiguity, thus questioning the usual forms of human communication and human interaction”. When clues point to several suspects at once, the role of the detective is to “dispel entropy, cultural equiprobability that is produced by and is a relevant aspect of the crime : he will have to reinstate the univocal ties between signifiers and signifieds” (1983 : 146).
29. Barthes compares every text to a spider web : “*Texte veut dire Tissu... dans ce tissu – cette texture – le sujet s’y défait, telle une araignée qui se dissoudrait elle-même dans les sécrétions constructives de sa toile. Si nous aimions les néologismes, nous pourrions définir la théorie du texte comme une hypologie (hyphos, c’est le tissu et la toile d’araignée)*” (Barthes 1973 : 100 - 101).
  30. In elaborating this perception of antagonistic polyphony and intertextuality, the work of Antoine Compagnon appears to be of great utility. In his major text on intertextuality entitled *La seconde main ou le travail de la citation*, Compagnon maintains that the citation permeates every literary creation : “*Toute écriture est collage et glose, citation et commentaire*” (1979 : 32). The discourse of Compagnon’s text evokes the symbolic violence that is embodied in the citation. He uses a rather picturesque vocabulary to describe the injurious nature of citation: “*Lorsque je cite, j’excise, je mutile, je prélève*” (1979 : 17). The text that the citation “mutilates” becomes an organic, almost bodily matter. The citation dismantles and stratifies; in a surgical movement it cuts up the body of the text and transforms it into a “*membre amputé ... organe découpé et mis en réserve*” (Compagnon 1979 : 18). Extending the metaphor, Compagnon compares the quotation marks to a scar left by the textual amputation, and the reading to an act of excision : “*l’homme aux ciseaux est le seul vrai lecteur*” (1979 : 28). What happens within Binet’s text seems to confirm Compagnon’s argument that the practice of quotation harmonizes irreconcilable forces : “*Connait-on ailleurs, dans quelque autre champ d’activité humaine, une semblable réconciliation, dans un seul et même mot, des incompatibles fondamentaux que sont la disjonction et la conjonction, la mutilation et l’ente, le moins et le plus, l’export et l’import, le découpage et le collage?*” (1979 : 29). The mutilated text is, at the same time, a foreign body that is disturbingly grafted onto the hypertext in order to disrupt its coherence.
  31. For example, they witness the death of Derrida who is ripped apart by wild dogs at a conference at Cornell University.
  32. Barthes argued that the usage of the first person is the only one that can perform a destructive gesture towards and within the novel : “*Le ‘il’ est une convention-type du roman; l’égale du temps narratif, il signale et accomplit le fait romanesque; sans la troisième personne, il y a impuissance à atteindre au roman, ou voloné de le détruire... La troisième personne, comme le passé simple, rend donc cet office à l’art romanesque et fournit à ses consommateurs la sécurité d’une fabulation crédible et pourtant sans cesse manifestée comme fausse*” (Barthes 1965 : 53).
  33. It is no accident that one of the main characters in the novel is Umberto Eco.
  34. See Derek Attridge and Jane Elliott in *Theory after Theory* and Graeme Macdonald’s *Post-Theory : New Directions in Criticism*.

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## Abstract

On February 25th 1980, in front of the Collège de France, a traffic accident claimed a victim whose name was not unfamiliar: that of the famous semiotician and literary critic Roland Barthes. Was it merely an accident, or was it murder? In a bizarre police investigation, in which the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred, police commissioner Jacques Bayard and his assistant, the young semiotician Simon Herzog, will prove that Roland Barthes was indeed killed, because he was in possession of a mysterious manuscript on the seventh function of language.

This article demonstrates the strategies that Laurent Binet adopts to problematize the myth that has been formed around the work and life of Roland Barthes. By staging Barthes's fictional murder, Binet liquidates the canonical monument of French Theory via the lowbrow intervention of the detective story. By killing off Roland Barthes, a tutelary figure of modern semiology, Binet



questions the limits and potentialities of Barthes's legacy in today's post poststructuralist era when theorists are being increasingly assimilated into the popular culture, while also being fetishized within the closed academic eco-chambers. Binet adopts a popular genre to follow Barthes's steps in dismantling yet another one of the bourgeois myths - the Canon of High Theory. Finally, this article shows that Binet's novel is an attempt to reanimate Barthes and French Theory by resituating their writings in the realm of the popular, material, and accessible.

## Résumé

Le 25 février 1980, devant le Collège de France, un accident de la circulation emporte une victime dont le nom n'est pas inconnu : il s'agit du célèbre sémiologue et critique littéraire Roland Barthes. Était-ce un simple accident ou une tentative d'assassinat ? Dans une investigation policière abracadabrante où se brisent les frontières entre réalité et fiction, le commissaire Jacques Bayard et son assistant, un jeune sémiologue Simon Herzog, prouveront que Roland Barthes a bel et bien été tué car il était en possession d'un mystérieux manuscrit sur la septième fonction du langage.

Cet article vise à montrer les divers mécanismes que Laurent Binet adopte afin de problématiser le mythe qui s'est formé autour de la vie et de l'œuvre de Roland Barthes. En mettant en scène le meurtre fictif de Barthes, Binet liquide le monument canonique de la *French Theory* via l'intervention *lowbrow* du roman policier. En tuant Roland Barthes, la figure tutélaire de la sémiologie moderne, Binet questionne les limites et les potentialités de l'héritage de Barthes au cours de la présente ère post poststructuraliste lorsque les théoriciens sont de plus en plus assimilés à la culture populaire, tout en étant fétichisés au sein des chambres d'écho académiques fermées. Binet adopte le genre du roman populaire pour suivre les pas de Barthes dans le démantèlement d'un des mythes de la société bourgeoise - celui du canon de la *Haute Théorie*. Enfin, cet article montre que le roman de Binet représente une tentative de réanimer Barthes et la *French Theory* en resituant leurs textes dans le domaine du populaire, du matériel et de l'accessible.

ZVEZDANA OSTOJIC is a PhD candidate at Johns Hopkins University. She received her MA in Translation and Interpreting from the University of Nice. Her dissertation, entitled "*Rencontres fatales : formes policières et affrontements intertextuels dans la fiction contemporaine*" examines a corpus of novels published in French at the turn of the 21st century that borrowed codes and structures of crime fiction genre to stage the rewriting of canonical literary texts. She is also interested in experimental fiction of the 20th and 21st centuries, and the intersection of film studies and ethics. She has published articles on Albert Camus, Kamel Daoud, and Marguerite Duras.