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The photograph, the sign (ification), and the myth: The psychopolitics of liberation

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Abstract

The recent death of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela has thrust the question of her significance in the history of South Africa to the fore—specifically, her role in the liberation struggle and subsequent developments in the history of this newly democratic nation. Rather than enter into dialogue with the diverse responses to her death and the question of her legacy, this article addresses the issue from a perspective opened up by Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of a photograph showing a uniformed black soldier saluting (presumably the French flag). Barthes demonstrates the image's potency in myth-making. Similarly, I would like to demonstrate that the different responses to Winnie's death may be understood as deriving to a large extent from the sheer power of the myth that surrounded her in her relation to Nelson Mandela. This power is nowhere more apparent than in an iconic photograph, dating back to Nelson Mandela's release from prison on 11 February 1990. The couple are shown, side by side, arms outstretched in the black power salute. This photograph resurrects the other, which appeared on the cover of the magazine *Paris-Match* in the mid-1950s and was skilfully decoded by Roland Barthes in the context of the French "empire" at the time. Barthes' analysis suggests that a similar approach might yield interesting insights into the myth-making capacity of the photograph of Winnie and Nelson Mandela from 1990, which may, in turn, shed light on the different reactions to Winnie's recent death (April 2018).

KEYWORDS

myth, Nelson Mandela, psychopolitics, Roland Barthes, semiology, Winnie Mandela

1 | INTRODUCTION

The recent death of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela on 2 April 2018 has given rise to a number of diverse responses, some of which highlight her contribution to the struggle and to the democratic character of present-day South Africa (see for example, Dlamini, 2018), while others focus on a darker side of the woman, which cannot be separated from the death of Stompie Seipei under incriminating circumstances (referred to below). There are also some that do not eschew the controversial in favour of heaping praise upon Winnie, or vice versa, but acknowledge that her complex personality, caught in a turbulent time and place in history, understandably gave rise to actions both praiseworthy and reprehensible (see for example, Isaacson, 2015, for a discussion of Njabulo Ndebele's "biographical" novel on Winnie Mandela, which acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of her character). One could approach the event of her death by attempting to adjudicate among the countervailing positions on Winnie—those that lionise her and those that disparage her—which is probably an impossible task, given that these are largely irreconcilable; but it is better to affirm the co-presence of conflicting traits in her personality. Or, with February anniversaries in mind, one could approach the significance of her life and death from the improbable angle of a semiotic analysis of an iconic photograph of her together with her then husband, Nelson Mandela, on the day of his release from prison, 11 February 1990. The advantage of the latter approach is that it affords one a perspective on her life and death that clarifies the grounds for the strongly felt opinions people maintain towards her, both pro and contra, as I shall demonstrate below with recourse to the work of Roland Barthes.

2 | 1 BARTHES ON THE SIGNIFICATION OF MYTH

In "Myth Today" (1993, pp. 109–159), Roland Barthes explained the difference between myth as a "type of speech" or "system of communication" with a distinctive "message" and other, more usual kinds of language usage. He stresses that myth is not recognisable by the "substance" or "object" of its message, but by certain formal characteristics (p. 109). Barthes reminds one that semiology (founded by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century), which gives one access to these formal attributes of myth, "is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content" (p. 111). In other words it deals *not* with the really existing (or, on the other hand, fictional) "substance" of a sentence, statement, or photograph (whether ordinary or myth-related), but with its formal features.

Like his contemporaries, Barthes was familiar with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, particularly his influential *Cours de Linguistique Générale* [*Course in General Linguistics*] (de Saussure, 1916/1977), which was published posthumously in 1916. Barthes' debt to the Swiss linguist is apparent from the following remark: "For mythology, since it is the study of a type of speech, is but one fragment of this vast science of signs which [de] Saussure postulated some forty years ago under the name of *semiology*." (Barthes, 1993, p. 111) What are the formal characteristics focused on by semiology? Following de Saussure, Barthes emphasised that there are not merely two terms of importance for semiology, as many people seem to think, namely the *signifier* (a word, gesture, or image) and the *signified* (the correlative concept), but the *sign*, too: "the associative total of the first two terms" (Barthes, 1993, p. 113). As far as everyday meanings are concerned, a bunch of roses, for example, can *signify* passion on the part of someone who presents it to someone else; here the rose bouquet comprises the signifier and the accompanying passion the signified, and together they constitute a specific sign. Importantly, Barthes pointed out, the signifier by itself is

"empty," while the sign (under which the signifier and its signified are united) "is full, it is a meaning" (p. 113). He also distinguished, again, between the purely formal relations among these three terms, to which different "contents" can obviously be given, as the example demonstrates.

So how do the signifying functions of these three terms differ when they operate in myth, instead of ordinary speech or writing? Here it is important to quote Barthes (1993):

> *In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern . . . the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second . . . it is precisely this final term which will become the first term of the greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part. Everything happens as if myth shifted the formal system of the first significations sideways. (pp. 114–115)*

To grasp what is at stake here, think of the bunch of roses referred to earlier, which, as a sign, comprises the associative union of the signifier (rose bouquet) and signified (passion). For this to enter the domain of myth, the bunch of roses as sign (roses and passion combined, in a photograph, for instance, of someone offering roses to another person, presumably their beloved), must be shifted sideways in its signification, so that it becomes a *new* kind of signifier (roses and passion combined, in such a photograph), with a new signified (something like the concept "flowers are invariably a token of eternal love"), coming together in a new sign (the combination of the signifier and the signified in the photograph), which henceforth incrementally exercises a kind of mythical fascination on men and women alike, lodging in the collective psyche as a kind of fusion of the botanical (roses) and the erotic (passion).

Among the examples of signifiers signifying a mythical state of affairs, discussed by Barthes, the one most pertinent to my aim of finding an angle of incidence into the question of Winnie Mandela's significance in South African history, is a photograph on the cover of a magazine. I intend using this as a basis for comparison of a photograph of Winnie and Nelson Mandela. As I shall indicate, both are iconic in the sense of embodying unifying (and therefore also potentially divisive) images of courage in the face of oppression, and of liberation from the oppressor.

This is how Barthes introduced it (1993):

> *I am at the barber's, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover [see Figure 1], a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore . . . faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute) [a new, mythical "sign"]; there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier. (p. 115)*

It should be clear how the establishment of a mythical state of affairs occurs here through what Barthes termed a sideways shift of the first signification (or sign)—in this case, a black soldier saluting—to the position of a new signifier, which, together with its (new) signified, constitutes a new, mythical sign, signifying that the integrity of the French empire is testified to by soldiers of all races paying her homage in military fashion. What makes this "mythical" as opposed to the usual signifying function of signs, is that, while the latter embodies a meaning like the one Barthes notes in the excerpt above, a mythical sign makes a claim *beyond* any such primary signification, and one, moreover, which can be challenged in a way that signs with primary signification are usually not questioned. No one, except those who do not understand what a soldier or a salute is, would question the

FIGURE 1 The *Paris-Match* cover photo that Barthes refers to in 'Myth today' (p. 115)

primary meaning of the photograph under discussion. One could therefore safely say that, because it can be challenged, a mythical sign embodies a value judgement or, as Barthes put it, "myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (p. 117). It is further highly pertinent to my analysis of the photograph of Winnie and Nelson Mandela (below), that Barthes (1993) added the insight that:

> *what is invested in the concept [of French imperiality, the signified of the photograph in question] is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality. . . . In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations . . . it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function. (1993, p. 119)*

Importantly, Barthes immediately qualified this by stating "that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*:. .. French imperiality must appeal to such and such group of readers and not another" (p. 119), and (just as pertinent), that the "mythical concept. .. [is] the very intention of behaviour" (p. 120).

3 | AN ICONIC PHOTOGRAPH AS MYTH

https://qz.com/1242879/winnie-mandela-has-died-her-life-in-photos/

With the above in mind, one can turn to a photograph of Winnie and Nelson Mandela, taken on the occasion of the latter's release from prison in 1990 (Brand South Africa, 2015), with a view to offering an interpretation of it along the lines suggested by Barthes' "mythological" decoding of the photograph of a black French soldier saluting. What does one see here? Winnie, on Nelson's left, is holding her left arm up, her hand in a fist, palm forward, giving a "black power salute," while his right arm is performing the same gesture, inaugurated, famously, by Tommie Smith and John Carlos giving what have become known as black power salutes on the podium at the Olympic Games in Mexico City. Figure 2 shows a representation of the incident in the form of a sculpture on the campus of San José State University.

What strikes one immediately, keeping the French soldier's salute in mind—particularly, as Barthes reminded one in the (1950s) context of French imperial power—is that in the two images one is confronted by two very different kinds of salute. We already know, through Barthes's "mythological" analysis, that the black French soldier's salute (ostensibly) acknowledges his fealty to the French Empire, which, at the time, was seen as a politically oppressive colonial power by many. In the case of the two Mandelas' simultaneous black power salutes, however, the significance of the gesture is reversed: instead of their salutes expressing allegiance to a political power (the apartheid regime) that was widely acknowledged as being (violently) oppressive, they signal the power that Nelson Mandela's release from prison by the apartheid authorities affirmed at the time. His liberation, therefore, demonstrated Michel Foucault's (1990) insistence, that power is not merely "negative" or oppressive, but that it is "productive" or enabling. What the power that emanated from those two raised black fists, themselves the products of a preceding liberation struggle, produced in turn is well-known in retrospect: the political ascendancy of the African National Congress as

FIGURE 2 A statue by "Rigo 23" of Tommie Smith and John Carlos giving the black power salute on the medallists podium at the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968.

ruling party in a newly democratic South Africa since 1994, when the first elections were held and Nelson Mandela was elected the country's first President.

But this is to place the photograph all too glibly in a historical context, and in an easily accessible manner. What about a properly mythological reading of the picture, particularly in relation to the significance of (the recent death of) Winnie Mandela? Recall Barthes' characterisation of myth as a mode of speech (or of image-configuration, for that matter)—it is parasitical upon the primary level of signification, surreptitiously employing the signifier and signified, combined in the first-order sign, as a new signifier. In this case, the primary signifier comprises an image of two people saluting, with smiles on their faces—his more restrained than hers, surrounded by a throng of other people, and the corresponding signified is evidently joy of a certain, probably triumphant, kind. These two semiological aspects come together under the sign, so one can say that the meaning of the picture of two people holding up their arms is triumphant joy. At the level of secondary signification, however (as in the case of the picture of the black soldier saluting), this fairly innocuous impression changes. Now the sign (or meaning) of two people joyously (or victoriously, but that may already be reading too much into it at a primary level) holding up their arms in a salute of sorts becomes a new signifier, evoking a new, correlative signified or concept, which here amounts to an amalgam of "blackness" and "power." Both of these semiological elements are subsumed under the new sign, which is a combination of the signifier and signified, and the signification of which is something like "These two people's depicted actions represent the fusion of blackness and power."

If this seems too arbitrary or far-fetched an interpretation of what, at a purely formal level, is merely the image of two people, surrounded by others, holding up their arms with clenched fists, one should remind oneself of the fact that it is not only language that functions as discourse (or, in a different idiom, as ideology, which is what Barthes' "myth" approximates here)—that is, as medium where meaning and power converge (Foucault, 1982, x; Lacan, 2007, 20–24). Images, too, can and do have this function, as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1995) demonstrated so well in his work on figure and discourse, particularly where he listed some examples pertaining to the visual arts, which include the following:

> *A glass is placed between an object and the eye; the chin is locked in a chin strap, which immobilizes the head (the eye). The hand traces the contour of the object on the glass. The tracing is transferred to a canvas (the apparatus of Dürer and Leonardo). (p. 16)*

That this is a description of the technique for arriving at the traditional "figure" of perspective, dating back to the European Renaissance, which bestows upon works like those of Dürer and Leonardo an ordering of space that is not innocuous, should be obvious; after all, to be able to paint strictly according to the convention of perspective requires that space first be reduced to geometrical space, which, in its turn, corresponds with the mathematisation of space that was required for modern physics to be possible, preparing the way for technological control through its abstract representations of nature. Needless to stress, power (over nature) is inseparable from this. Jacques Rancière has confirmed Lyotard's insights with his notion of "the distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2010, location 499), a phrase that captures the manner in which power is legible in the configuration of the social realm at the level of the sensible, that is, the perceptible, in egalitarian or, alternatively, hierarchical terms. In light of these considerations, it goes without saying that the image of the black power salute on the part of Winnie and Nelson Mandela in the memorable photograph under discussion instantiates a "figure" that functions with discursive (that is, cratological) effect.

4 | MAKING SENSE OF THE EVENT OF WINNIE'S DEATH

Against this backdrop the divergent opinions on Winnie's legacy in South Africa make sense; while one could perhaps make out a case for suggesting that not even Nelson Mandela was a saint—something that I cannot pursue here—at an intuitive level it seems to me that there are more grounds for such an argument in Winnie's case, given her entanglement in the Stompie Seipei murder case, where she was accused of having given the order for him to be executed,

although she was only given a suspended sentence for her role in the murder (see Duke, 1997; Head, 2018). But—and this is the thrust of my argument—the countervailing arguments pro and contra both draw tacitly on the "myth" of Winnie embodied in the iconic photograph analysed earlier. Recall Barthes's (1993, p. 119) observations, "that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*" and that the "mythical concept. .. [is] the very intention of behaviour." If the myth established by the iconic picture in question can indeed be articulated in terms of the fusion of blackness and power by the combined gestures of the two Mandelas, then it follows that this myth appeals affirmatively to one specific group of people, and negatively to another. The mythical nature of the relationship instantiated by the photograph is therefore a condition of the possibility of honouring Winnie as the "mother of the nation" (Beauchamp, 2018), and simultaneously *also* for disparaging her as a kind of Mafia "godmother" who was capable of unscrupulous actions resulting in the death of people like Stompie Seipei. This is the implication of Barthes' remark above, that the "very intention of behaviour" is implicated in the "mythical concept" (the signified at the second-order level of signification), which here entails linking Winnie Mandela iconically—through a mythologised image, that is—with blackness and power.

Put plainly, the intentions on the part of countervailing groups (and within these, of individual subjects) with divergent attitudes and actions, are ineluctably nourished by the "myth" of her intertwinement with black political power—established by, among other things, the photograph of Winnie with Nelson, discussed above, which is ultimately metonymically connected with other such photographs of Winnie (or Nelson) repeating the black power salute on different occasions (see, for example, Dlamini, 2018). After all, the semiological analysis that occurs at the formal level not only has a real-world correlate, or content; the latter also corresponds with countervailing group appropriations of the myth (of Nelson and Winnie representing black power, as projected by the photo-image under consideration) in the collective psyche, and within these, with diverse individual appropriations of this myth in negative and affirmative ways. The sheer force of the attitudes towards Winnie, whether those of unconditional "mythical" adoration, or alternatively, of vehement demonisation, by itself demonstrates that their source must be more than a mere evaluation of the woman on the basis of so-called "facts"; for her to loom as large as she does in the collective psyche of the nation (and beyond), "a certain knowledge of reality" (Barthes, 1993, p. 119) on the part of her detractors no less than her adherents must be presupposed, regardless of the fact that the knowledge in either case is diametrically opposed to that of the other. I believe that situating the psychopolitics which surrounds the figure of Winnie Mandela in relation to the liberation of her (then) husband in 1990 (and by implication all black people in South Africa), resurrected on the occasion of her recent death, within the semiological context provided by Roland Barthes, adds significantly to the comprehension of the tensions and contradictions pervading this event.

It appears that this approach raises the question of a psychotherapy of sorts, which might perhaps, taking its cue from Barthes's semiological account of myth, be dubbed "semiotic therapy." This would entail disabusing people caught in the grip of a myth (in the Barthesian sense), of remaining unilaterally within the force-field of a binary opposition, by uncovering the semiological conditions of the ambivalent possibility of myth-adherence, in this way relativising its magnetism and defusing antagonism between opposite poles. Needless to point out, however, only subjects receptive to such semiotic analysis would benefit from it.

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