

Excerpts: Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana

Here we have a Panzani advertisement: some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag, in yellows and greens on a red background. Let us try to 'skim off' the different messages it contains.

The image immediately yields a first message, whose substance is linguistic; its supports are the caption, which is marginal, and the labels, these being inserted into the natural disposition of the scene, '*en abyme*'. The code from which this message has been taken is none other than that of the French language; the only knowledge required to decipher it is a knowledge of writing and of French. In fact, this message can itself be further broken down, for the sign Panzani gives not simply the name of the firm but also, by its assonance, a additional signified, that of 'Italianicity'. The linguistic message is therefore twofold (at least in this particular image): denotational and connotational. Since, however, we have here only a single typical sign, namely that of articulated (written) language, it will be counted as one message.



Putting aside the linguistic message, we are left with the pure image (even if the labels are part of it, anecdotally). This image straightaway provides a series of discontinuous signs. First (the order is unimportant as these signs are not linear), the idea that what we have in the scene represented is a return from the market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined. Its signifier is the half-open bag which lets the provisions spill out over the table, 'unpacked'. To read this first sign requires only a knowledge which is in some sort implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture where 'shopping around for oneself' is opposed to the hasty stocking up (preserves, refrigerators) of a more 'mechanical' civilization. A second sign is more or less equally evident; its signifier is the bringing together of the tomato, the pepper and the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, red) of the poster; its signified is Italy, or rather *Italianicity*. This sign stands in a relation of redundancy with the connoted sign of the linguistic message (the Italian assonance of the name *Panzani*) and the knowledge it draws upon is already more particular; it is a specifically 'French' knowledge (an Italian would barely perceive the connotation of the name, no more probably than he would the Italianicity of tomato and pepper), based on a familiarity with certain tourist stereotypes. Continuing to explore the image (which is not to say that it is not entirely clear at the first glance), there is no difficulty in discovering at least two other signs: in the first, the serried collection of different objects transmits the idea of a total culinary service, on the one hand as though Panzani furnished everything necessary for a carefully balanced dish and on the other as though the concentrate in the tin were equivalent to the natural produce surrounding it; in the other sign, the composition of the image, evoking the memory of innumerable alimentary paintings, sends us to an aesthetic signified: the '*nature morte*' or, as it is better expressed in other languages, the 'still life'; the knowledge on which this sign depends is heavily cultural.

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I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, 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 again 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*); 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... In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the signs of the language... Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us...

One must put the biography of the Negro* in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified... The form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance... It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. The form of myth is not a symbol: the Negro* who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperialism...

Myth is... defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense... In spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense (*The French Empire? It's just a fact: look at this good Negro* who salutes like one of our own boys*). This constituent ambiguity... has two consequences for the signification, which henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact... French imperialism condemns the saluting Negro* to be nothing more than an instrumental signifier, the Negro* suddenly hails me in the name of French imperialism; but at the same moment the Negro's* salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to establish French imperialism...

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... In the case of the soldier-Negro*... what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: *fabricated*, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes 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. If I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions... Things appear to mean something by themselves...

*Translator's term - *not* the choice of this author