

Books by Roland Barthes

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CRITICAL ESSAYS
THE EIFFEL TOWER AND OTHER MYTHOLOGIES
ELEMENTS OF SEMIOLOGY
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IMAGE-MUSIC-TEXT
A LOVER'S DISCOURSE
MYTHOLOGIES
NEW CRITICAL ESSAYS
ON RACINE
THE PLEASURE OF THE TEXT
ROLAND BARTHES
SADE/FOURIER/LOYOLA
S/Z
WRITING DEGREE ZERO

Roland Barthes

Empire of Signs

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The text does not “gloss” the images, which do not “illustrate” the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that *loss of meaning* Zen calls a *satori*. Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs.



Faraway

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (though it is then that fantasy itself I compromise by the signs of literature). I can also—though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (these being the major gestures of Western discourse)—isolate somewhere in the world (*faraway*) a certain number of features (a term employed in linguistics), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.

Hence Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as "realities" to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation—whose invented interplay—allows me to "entertain" the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own. What can be addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, are not other symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom (though the latter might appear thoroughly desirable); it is the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic

systems. Someday we must write the history of our own obscurity—manifest the density of our narcissism, tally down through the centuries the several appeals to difference we may have occasionally heard, the ideological recuperations which have infallibly followed and which consist in always acclimating our incognizance of Asia by means of certain known languages (the Orient of Voltaire, of the *Revue Asiatique*, of Pierre Loti, or of *Air France*). Today there are doubtless a thousand things to learn about the Orient: an enormous labor of *knowledge* is and will be necessary (its delay can only be the result of an ideological occultation); but it is also necessary that, leaving aside vast regions of darkness (capitalist Japan, American acculturation, technological development), a slender thread of light search out not other symbols but the very fissure of the symbolic. This fissure cannot appear on the level of cultural products: what is presented here does not appertain (or so it is hoped) to art, to Japanese urbanism, to Japanese cooking. The author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan. Rather, he has done the opposite: Japan has starred him with any number of "flashes"; or, better still, Japan has afforded him a situation of writing. This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings, a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object's ever ceasing to be significant, desirable. Writing is after all, in its way, a *satori: satori* (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful (though in no way formal) seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates *an emptiness of language*. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing; it is from this emptiness that derive the features with which Zen, in the exemption from all meaning; writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence.

accute
satori



Mu, emptiness