

Michael Sheringham, 1948-2016

Andy Stafford

It is never fitting to pass away at the very young age of 67, but Michael (Mickey) Sheringham would have been honoured to know that he shared his year of demise with the eminent French poet, art critic and translator Yves Bonnefoy who died in July 2016 and with whom Mickey had worked extensively. The lesser amongst us would have given up the ghost much earlier, but, with customary good spirits, Mickey bore his long illness with grace and even humour. Such was his modest approach to his extraordinary achievements – Marshal Foch Professor of French at the University of Oxford, one of the rare British specialists of French Studies to be known in France and translated into French and amongst the very first theorists to publish on autobiography in French – that Mickey kept going to the very end.

Though not well enough to give his paper at the British Academy centenary conference on Roland Barthes (held in London in October 2015) that he had gallantly co-organised, he was ‘damned’ if he was going to miss it. So those present were treated to his enormous knowledge, incisive analysis and sparkling wit in relation to Barthes’s *oeuvre*. Indeed, Mickey had published a splendid chapter on Barthes and notation in the Collège de France lectures in his brilliant monograph *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (2006), and another on writing the self in *Roland Barthes par lui-même* in his 1993 study of autobiography; all this from a scholar who had begun his academic career compiling a bibliography of André Breton (1972). This was typical of his approach: both a specialist of modern poetry and a huge fan of Georges Perec – writing a startling piece on the latter’s domestic essayism (2005) – Mickey constantly applied Barthesian approaches and theories in his wide-ranging work on, and devotion to, modern French literature and visual culture. His 2005 project with Johnnie Gratton, on the *Art of the Project*, was no exception as he inserted François Bon’s writing into a Barthesian ‘attention’ to the details of everyday existence. Indeed, it was with great amusement that he would point out that, born in Cairo in 1948 to a French-speaking Copt mother and a British civil-servant father, he was not far away from the Alexandria

that Barthes had experienced in 1948. We Barthes scholars can only speculate on where he stood on the Barthes-Foucault question, as his final monograph on the latter was left unfinished.

In a *non*-Barthesian manner, Mickey was always the life and soul of an academic and intellectual gathering, keen to join in any dancing and festivities, but always serious and dedicated, returning, the next day and every day, to his work on French literature. Mickey was due to write the preface to this number of *Barthes Studies* on 'Barthes and Poetry'; it is perhaps fitting therefore if we remind ourselves of Barthes's tender words, albeit in a very different context, written in 1944 to the bereaved parents of his friend Jacques Veil who had died in the street-fighting in Paris: 'We must still and always talk about him. Through his life and his death, he has situated himself outside of forgetting, outside of death. It is certainly no consolation for our hearts, but it is an obligation, an example for the soul of we who live on'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Stafford is the author of *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth. An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh, 1998); co-editor (with Claude Coste) of Roland Barthes's seminar notes, « *Sarrasine* » de Balzac (Les Editions du Seuil, 2011); and translator of Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (Berg/Power Publications, 2006). His most recent book is a 'Critical Life' of Barthes (Reaktion Press, 2015). He is a member of the 'équipe Barthes' at ITEM/CNRS in Paris and a Senior Lecturer in French Studies at the University of Leeds.

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