

## BOOK REVIEW

### New Mythologies

Martyn Woodward

Rebecca Houze, *New Mythologies in Design and Culture: Reading Signs and Symbols in the Visual Landscape* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Some may ask how a work inspired by the literary criticism of Roland Barthes has a home in a twenty-first century context that has moved past the post-structuralism of which Barthes was part. Where cultural studies and the humanities in general are undertaking a new materialist, performative and vitalist re-orientation, how can the work of 'signification' such as Barthes find a home amongst those who have strategically moved away from the study of language? Houze is not only mindful of such a challenge, but succeeds in re-orientating the critical depth and power of Barthes work in an attempt to change our habits, legislation and world-views. This is no ordinary work of literary criticism, she reminds us: in the hands of the design historian, practitioner or theorist it unpacks the political and ideological underpinnings of popular myth that permeate daily life at the start of the twenty-first century. It is a call to arms to quash, following Barthes, the naturalised views that common sense, the press, and the arts invoke to dress up reality.

The true ambition of Houze's *New Mythologies in Design and Visual Culture* is captured in its simplicity, criticality and playful nature with its closing remarks following a study of the truisms of Minecraft and Lego, 'let's try to think more carefully about what kind of instincts our play satisfies. Are they instincts to increase our various consumptions of goods and energy? Or are they the ones that inspire us to create a world?' Her choice to finish the volume on the topic of play is a crucial one. Not only does Houze beautifully reveal the naturalised behavior that is promoted through artefacts of play that consist of McDonalds, the Nintendo DS, the Laricks first ABC, toy guns, coins and Nike, but she

asks us to imagine how the world could be if we re-designed our visual and material culture for different kinds of play. With a broad range of topics also spanning the designations for 'red' and 'blue' states, reading children's primers, graphic motifs and branding and products of globalised consumption, the reach and scope of the analysis touches many aspects of our everyday life.

Through her playful unveiling of the *Mythologies* of the artefacts of the twenty-first century, and the weaving together of the narratives between these artefacts, Houze demonstrates the value of doing so as more than just a contemporary application of Barthes' method to key moments in the history of Western graphic design. Bringing together anthropological, historical, iconographical and post-colonial narratives Houze draws our attention to the importance of the everyday, forgotten, and overlooked artefacts of visual and material culture by reminding us of the agency that artefacts of this kind have in the shaping behaviour. Each chapter liberates Barthes' *Mythologies* from the (perceived) chains of literary criticism, finding a place within more critical and speculative discourses of contemporary design thinking with a reach that is arguably global in scope and a depth of analysis that is at once critical, new-historical and postcolonial.

Houze's work reminds us how important it for designers to learn to read the material world around us. More importantly her essays equally point to the importance of designers taking responsibility and understanding how to re-direct the trajectory of the future. Within a landscape of new materialisms, new historicisms and other new isms, Houze successfully reminds us that there is still room for Barthes' critical take on the ideological trajectory of visual and material culture. Every chapter of Houze's volume is reminiscent of Barthes' own critique of French toys designed not for the world of children and their own worlds of signification, but rather to indoctrinate the child into the requirements and ideologies of an adult world view. Brought to bear upon the very adult world of design history, Houze's work offers a timely ideological critique of visual and material culture that is as world-making and ontologically powerful as any work of contemporary design theory, and – crucially – immensely more playful.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Martyn Woodward is a media archaeologist, philosopher and theorist working across the visual arts. His interests lie in non-linear narratives of media technologies and forms, particularly those that juxtapose human, technological, non-human and geological temporalities.

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