

BOOK REVIEW

And Other Writings

Nat Riley

Roland Barthes, *'A Very Fine Gift' and Other Writings on Theory: Essays and Interviews, Volume 1*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015).

Roland Barthes. *Signs and Images: Writings on Art, Cinema and Photography: Essays and Interviews, Volume 4*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016).

Near the heart of Chris Turner's first volume of translations from Barthes' *Œuvres complètes* lies 'Ten Reasons to Write' (pp. 85-87) – a slight but provocative essay which captures the compact heft of *'A Very Fine Gift'* at its most engaging. Originally featured in a 1969 issue of *Corriere della sera* as 'Dieci ragioni per scrivere,' but published here in an English translation for the first time, the essay is a candid manifesto for the place and purpose of writing. Alongside other, and more playful, reasons – '7. To gratify friends, and irritate enemies' – Barthes outlines the dialectical imperative for which he imagines that he writes: that is, to escape the thrall of certain meaning by attending to things in a new way. At its revolutionary apogee, which Barthes terms the *unreadable*, writing is thus said to offer us an astonishing encounter with 'another way of feeling, another way of thinking'. Reflective of this restless, revolutionary desire for new avenues and approaches to the artefact, *'A Very Fine Gift'* presents a sweeping assemblage of Barthes' thought on literature, linguistics, semiotics, sociology, and the text.

It is precisely the scope of these interventions, however, which highlights the editorial challenge of gathering together over thirty years of reviews, interviews, and essays from such a generous and protean thinker into discrete, thematic volumes. But while Turner happily admits to *Barthes Studies* that the selections may, at times, feel a little arbitrary, I find myself instead in two minds.¹ On the one hand, any thematic collection will always be most vulnerable at the points of incision, especially in so heterogeneous a canon as Barthes'. Indeed, I

often found myself enjoying surprising moments of resonance between essays in *'A Very Fine Gift'* which otherwise seemed only tangentially related. On the other hand, the wide reach of the collection – both theoretically and temporally – gives the 24 included works an impression of disunity that might also feel, at times, a little frustrating; a discontinuity only emphasised by Turner's adherence to the chronological arrangement of the *Œuvres complètes*, above any thematic grouping one might expect. While Turner's selections are thus extensive, the collection itself cannot be said to aim at any particular theoretical comprehensiveness – a constraint which does not prevent it from offering an abundance of new critical ground that will no doubt serve to stimulate sundry reading and debate in Anglophone Barthes studies.

Befitting this diversity, Turner offers no general introduction to *'A Very Fine Gift'*, nor to *Signs and Images*, but rather provides a brief preface to each translation. These editorial introductions are undoubtedly useful, offering a good deal of foundational historical and cultural context (particularly with regard to publication history), but they are also largely descriptive, making no substantive attempts at critical explication. One example of the limitations inherent to this approach occurs in 'For a Theory of Reading' (pp. 156-60). Here 'interdisciplinarity' does not refer to discourses presently surrounding the neo-liberal university (as any novice reader today might understandably presume), but rather to a particular and historically contingent understanding of the interdisciplinary potential of the human sciences. In choosing to leave such important nuances unaddressed throughout both *'A Very Fine Gift'* and *Signs and Images*, Turner presumes a reader with a sufficient familiarity of Barthes – and French intellectual history more generally – to be discerning, and there are thus places where the general reader might struggle to gain purchase (especially when a premium has been placed upon the value of chronological organisation as a means of highlighting important phases in Barthes' thought).

Unlike the first volume, *Signs and Images* appears to possess a greater conceptual cohesion, focusing for the most part on Barthes' journalistic responses to the provocations offered by several contemporary *auteurs* of film, photography, and fine art. 'CinemaScope' (pp. 10-13) which addresses the work of Henri Chrétien, is a dazzling essay in this regard – and Turner's editorial introduction makes a strong case for its relation and relevance to the more well-known *Mythologies* (1957). As with the later essay 'Cinema Right and Left' (pp. 14-20), 'CinemaScope' has also been recently translated by Deborah Glassman, for Philip Watts' *Roland Barthes' Cinema* (2016) – a scholarly confluence

which marks the growing interest in Barthes and film. If Barthes' cinematic engagement has been previously overlooked, as Watts claims in his introduction, then we might count *Signs and Images* as another timely contribution to this emerging critical front, offering further fresh insight into Barthes' attempts to fashion a spectatorial semiology.² However, while providing a useful reminder that the image is not the least of those cultural artefacts from which other ways of feeling and thinking emerge, it is hard to see that the general reader is as well served by Turner's fourth volume of translations as they were in the first. The 20 essays and interviews of *Signs and Images* may showcase Barthes as a deft close reader, but it is ultimately this tight focus that makes the volume a little narrower in its scope, and consequently lacking in the formidable range which made *A Very Fine Gift* such a pleasure to read.

Notes

¹ Chris Turner and Neil Badmington, 'Very Fine Gifts: An Interview with Chris Turner', *Barthes Studies*, 1 (2015), 159.

² Philip Watts, *Roland Barthes' Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 9.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nat Riley is a PhD candidate at Durham University. Funded by a Wellcome Trust Doctoral Studentship, her research focuses on the cognitive turn in modern and contemporary Anglophone fiction.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2017 *Barthes Studies* and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).