

REVIEW ESSAY

Changing the Object

Sunil Manghani

Diana Knight, ed., *Interdisciplinary Barthes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

As one might imagine in picking up any hardback publication from Oxford University Press, *Interdisciplinary Barthes* is a satisfying book to behold. It bears all the signs of diligent scholarship (notable names; authoritative chapter titles, with accompanying abstracts; original French quotations; serif font throughout; stout binding; and a sense of order, presented in three intelligently labelled sections). Yet, this book was not what I had quite expected; not, I should be honest, what I had hoped for. To be clear, the book presents high-quality work. The cast of contributors is impressive (not least Jonathan Culler, Stephen Bann, Claude Coste, Éric Marty, Anne Herschberg Pierrot, Philippe Roger, Antoine Compagnon, Tiphonie Samoyault, and not forgetting the book's editor Diana Knight). The quality of scholarship and writing is sure to instil in any reader a sense of confidence. However, perversely perhaps, this is where the book falters somewhat. There is an air of predictability in looking at how it is structured, how the chapters read (and the fact they each read neatly in isolation). Again, this is not to cast aspersions on the actual content, which is certainly rewarding (more on which below).

The problem is principally in the title, *Interdisciplinary Barthes*. As Knight explains, it derives from a centenary conference supported and hosted by the British Academy in London, 2015. Sadly, Knight's collaborator, Michael Sheringham, died before the publication would come to fruition. One of the reasons for retaining the title of the event for the book, she notes, 'is my wish to keep intact the memory of an event that was stamped, right from its earliest planning, with his distinctive personality' (pp. xvii–xviii). This

is an understandable, and laudable, position to take. Yet, it is worth quoting at more length to situate what is really bound-up in the book's title. Knight goes onto to say:

...the concise title was meant to be enabling, and to encourage speakers to re-engage in ways of their choosing with the intellectual excitement that once characterised all stages of Barthes' work, before the more recent critical paradigm of the very late, bereaved, Barthes took such a firm hold. In this sense the title might just as well have been multi- or trans-disciplinary Barthes, Barthes between disciplines, Barthes at the crossroads of disciplines, Barthes and 'la traversée des disciplines', or some other variant of these tired-sounding rejects! But in settling upon 'interdisciplinary Barthes', we also hoped to re-inject some conceptual fertility into a term that has been hijacked in the present UK context of research assessment exercises (at best, disciplinary collaboration with a view to problem-solving and socially useful application, at worst, a superficial byword of a competitive grant-capture culture). However, we did not realise the extent to which Barthes himself, when he interrogated the term interdisciplinarity in the aftermath of the French higher education reforms of 1968, was grappling with similar problems. Retaining the title *Interdisciplinary Barthes*, albeit with some reservations, has forced me to think about why it is not straightforward to apply this epithet to Barthes, but also to understand why a 'good' interdisciplinarity was ultimately a positive and a significant concept for him. (p. xviii)

Despite being fêted (and contested) for his famous essay, 'The Death of the Author', one of the most striking features of Barthesian scholarship is just how often all lines lead back to Roland Barthes the author; to Barthes the person; the site of *meaning*. Whether or not Knight had chosen multi-, trans-, or inter-disciplinary as the operative word, the dominant signifier was always going to be Barthes (indeed he is explicitly the protagonist in the other suggested titles, whether at the crossroads, or traversing disciplines). It is also interesting to note that of the 20 images in the book, half of them are of Barthes himself.

In an entry for *Art Bulletin* (back in 1995), W.J.T. Mitchell offers a useful reflection on interdisciplinarity. Having written extensively on visual culture, always as an implied site of interdisciplinarity, he admits the term may only serve as a 'euphemism for something else, a term that permits us to feel

good about what we do and to avoid thinking about it too precisely'.¹ As he notes, the term works in the wider discourse as a 'good thing', but that it is a way of being 'just a little bit adventurous and even transgressive, but not too much' (p. 540). Instead, he suggests his real interest, all along, has in fact been forms of 'indiscipline', which he describes as 'turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines' (p. 541). It is worth remembering that Barthes, notably in reference to his seminal poststructuralist essays, 'The Death of the Author' and 'From Work to Text', was a key influence for the early development of visual culture in the late 1990s onwards (which in turn can be seen as a reprisal of the rapid developments of cultural and communication studies a decade or so earlier). Visual culture was taken to be an 'interdiscipline', supposedly because it was defined by the 'death of the object' – a notion that Mieke Bal and Nicholas Mirzoeff, in their respective projects, used to signal a radical shift incurred by the study of visual culture. The criticism levied against a poststructural visual culture was that it placed a pre-determined structure, albeit a 'fluid' interpretive structure, before the visual object, and so potentially thwarted any considered ontology of pictures themselves. Irit Rogoff, for example, referred to it as 'a field of vision version of Derrida's concept of *différance*'.² Such assertions were never really challenged or explored sufficiently, yet it is this level of enquiry (and assessment of the *impact* of Barthes' thinking) that would have been so welcome in a volume such as *Interdisciplinary Barthes*.

Diana Knight, in her introduction to the book, hints at such avenues, including a questioning of interdisciplinary akin to Mitchell's account of the indiscipline. She begins with an account of 'multidisciplinary Barthes', which offers a precis of his numerous interests and the range of his learning and thinking. She makes a somewhat surprising claim that 'interdisciplinary Barthes was born in the sanatorium' (p. 3), since there was a predominance of science on offer to those in residence (Barthes began a foundation course in medicine, but this was short-lived). However, this angle of enquiry is not sustained, and is certainly not picked up elsewhere in the book. What is clear, but arguably already well known (if only from reading *Mythologies*), was the fecundity of Barthes' interests and thinking. This, however, is not the same as saying he was interdisciplinary. He was learned and curious, but essentially he was a writer. Language and literature lie at the heart of his work *methodologically*. He was also idiosyncratic, which is perhaps why it is particularly difficult to sustain an interdisciplinary reading. There is an

evasiveness to Barthes that arguably draws us in, but never quite provides a method. He writes on an abstract, theoretical level, yet beyond the structuralist work, we are not actually represented with a 'theory'. (*Camera Lucida* famously offers an ironic theory of the photograph.) As he concludes in 'From Work to Text', the method is one of a *practice* of writing; arguably his *own* practice of writing. The famous essay at the end of *Mythologies* does not equip us to write anything like him; it does not enable the wit and challenge found in the individual myths.

Numerous contributions in *Interdisciplinary Barthes* refer to Barthes' role in the Linguistic Turn, but these are generally only scene-setting, introductory lines. An exploration of his legacy within and through the Linguistic Turn (which of course includes the truly broad take-up of semiotics) would constitute a genuine interdisciplinary enquiry; a whole investigatory project. Glimpses of such a project are narrated in the second half of Knight's introduction, which works through not so much the interdisciplinary, but rather the *disciplinary* concerns in circulation. Barthes' involvement with journals such as *Languages* and *Communications*, and his role at the École pratique des hautes études, are examples of (often cautious) *disciplinary* negotiations, which paved the way for more fluid disciplinary discourses within anthropology, sociology, literature, film and communications. As Knight elaborates, Barthes was more explicit still when moving to the Collège de France, where he tactfully positioned his chosen field of literary semiotics 'as a sort of peripatetic chair which, rather than taking the place of any disciplines, might help them all' (p. 15). It is perhaps this one line of Knight's that encapsulates the promise of an enquiry, but which as a collection of individually written chapters is not taken up. There is also an implicit critique of interdisciplinarity at stake. The suggestion that the UK's national research audit has perhaps hijacked the term (that it has instrumentalised such enquiry) seems somewhat churlish, not least as the book *Interdisciplinary Barthes* itself would no doubt score very highly through the peer review process. The problem of 'knowledge management' goes back further, and here again Knight opens up an important angle, noting Barthes' unease with interdisciplinarity due to 'its rapid embedding within post-1968 French higher education' (p. 12). The point being made here, however, is somewhat 'noises-off'. Knight references Éric Marty's account, which he provides *elsewhere* (i.e., not in this interdisciplinary collection), arguing how Barthes considered the May events to derail the intellectual climate of the

1960s, even that he ‘saw the student “demands” as complicit in the takeover of the human sciences by technocratic values’ (p. 13). It is a pity this line of enquiry is not taken up further as it would add an important historical dimension to the currently all-too-easy critiques of the neoliberal university. (It is worth consulting Samoyault’s acclaimed biography, *Roland Barthes*, which looks into the May events in greater detail.)

As things proceed, *Interdisciplinary Barthes* is divided into three sections, Part 1: Myths, History, and Images; Part 2: Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics; Part 3: Writing, Criticism, and the Archive. As mentioned, the individual chapters (5-6 in each section) are all to be commended, but by way of a review it is perhaps useful to present via an *alternative* three-part reading; one that does not divide up the contents evenly. All chapters could be said to contribute one way or another to intellectual history (if only by dint of Barthes’ posthumous status), but Stephen Bann’s account of Barthes’ important essay (and seminar) ‘The Discourse of History’ (Chapter 4) might be said to stand alone in a section dedicated to intellectual history. Bann offers a very compelling account of the broader international context (as well as Barthes’ positioning vis-à-vis Émile Benveniste).

The next section might be labelled as ‘theory’ chapters. Maria O’Sullivan (Chapter 5) picks up on the ‘Discourse of History’ seminar to draw out Barthes’ account of space and time, with specific reference to Jakobson’s account of the poetic form of language. Éric Marty’s contribution (Chapter 6) explores what he refers to as Barthes’ ‘visibility turn’, which very ably charts the break via *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* with the Marxist doctrine of mimesis. In *potentia* this chapter returns us to the considerations of visual culture theory (suggested above), but in this case the terms of reference remain within Barthes’ own work (of *Mythologies* and *Camera Lucida*). The territory explored echoes much of Jean-Michel Rabaté’s edited volume *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes* (published over two decades earlier). Kris Pint provides a discerning account of the ‘atmospheric experience of literature’ (Chapter 11), taking a steer from what he refers to as Barthes’ ‘active semiology’ (p. 165), which opens up personal, intimate approaches to literature. This chapter is echoed nicely by Patrizia Lombardo’s on emotions, which again looks at the later texts, in this case *A Lover’s Discourse*, and of course *Camera Lucida*. Finally, Andy Stafford points to Barthes’ writings and seminars of 1966-70 to explore notions of ‘creative criticism’. Each of these chapters can be said to open (and to some degree extend) theoretical readings

of Barthes, but, nonetheless, from a disciplinary perspective they remain securely within the realms of literature, literary criticism, and visual culture critique.

The remainder of the book, the other *eleven* chapters, can perhaps best be framed as *Barthes Studies*, or even *Advanced Barthes Studies* (as finely tuned, nuanced contributions). The opening chapter (after the introduction) is by Philippe Roger, who offers a thoughtful examination of Barthes's French identity (Chapter 2), which contrasts productively with Jonathan Culler's characteristically considered treatment of Barthes (Chapter 3), in this case referring to Barthes' reception in America (and Barthes' own 'myths' of America). Rounding-off the section on myth, history and image is Kathrin Yacavone's analysis of photographic portraits of Barthes (Chapter 7), and what she considers as 'his highly intentional photographic self-construction' (p. 97). As we see, despite very learned and insightful contributions, the focus is very much *ad hominem*. The section on religion, philosophy and ethics continues in this vein. Michael Moriarty presents an excellent overview of Barthes' relationship to religion (Chapter 8), starting with his Protestant background, before turning to the religious references of the late works, relating to Eastern mysticism. Moriarty leads to a useful distinction between religion and the religious (to echo Barthes' distinction between politics and the political). Lucy O'Meara offers a similarly insightful review, but in the context of philosophy and particularly Barthes' classicist training (Chapter 9), which is an aspect of his work that is prominent in the formation of key terms and argumentation, yet has to date received little attention. O'Meara develops her account with the external references of Pierre Hadot and Stanley Cavell, which begin to open up interdisciplinary trajectories. Marielle Macé shifts attention to ethics (Chapter 10), with a reading of Barthes' late lectures as offering examinations of forms of living; a chapter that is usefully twinned with François Noudelmann's account of Barthes' enjoyment of music (Chapter 12), which it is argued Barthes kept separate to semiology. Again, a hermetic reading of Barthes is evident here, and this is further the case in the remaining contributions appearing in the section on writing, criticism and the archive. Antoine Compagnon (Chapter 14), Claude Coste (Chapter 16), Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Chapter 17), and Tiphaine Samoyault (Chapter 18) each write very compelling chapters on Barthes' relationship to writing, research and the production of the 'work'. Samoyault, for example, offers a lucid account of what she calls 'ordinary' writing (letters, postcards, to-do lists,

notes, messages, shopping lists). Based on the archival research she undertook in writing Barthes' biography, this contribution is undoubtedly rewarding, and chimes with the earlier chapter on ethics, on forms of living, but which again reveals the book's overall project to be *about* Barthes (in very fine grain detail) and not a particular endeavour to understand what is at stake today in still reading Barthes, across domains and disciplines.

There is surely always a need for intellectual history (in fact it is perhaps never more necessary), and that certainly includes 'Barthes Studies' (which I've sought to contribute to myself, looking at Barthes' practice of painting and in exploring the 'late' Barthes). Of this industry of writing 'on' key thinkers and writers, which inevitably goes through trends, *Interdisciplinary Barthes* represents excellent work and is a reminder (if we needed one?) of the tremendous sustain in interest in the figure of Barthes. In the context of the journal this review is destined for, *Interdisciplinary Barthes* is a very fine volume of essays (like a box of expensive, individually wrapped chocolates). I greatly admire the quality of the contributions, which is of little surprise. This is a volume that has been ably put together, drawing upon a lustrous group of expert writers, and there is a lot new we can learn (albeit *about* Barthes, about the man and his way of thinking). I can't help feeling, however, the book represents a missed opportunity, or a false start. It is focused upon Barthes' *own* interdisciplinarity, rather than on his interdisciplinary impact. Briefly, in his lecture course *How to Live Together*, Barthes considers the idiorhythmic, which no less in our intellectual endeavours soon reveal themselves. The rhythms of a figure such as Barthes are well worth hearing about in detail. Yet, to present a lone Robinson-Crusoe-like figure (whom Barthes references in the context of idiorhythmy) as an interdisciplinarian is not sufficient for an exploration of interdisciplinarity.

To clarify: there is very little to fault within this book, in terms of its contributions, its level of scholarship. Take each chapter in turn and there is great reward. Yet, outwardly, there is the faint whiff of privilege. *Interdisciplinary Barthes* is the product of a group of established, indeed distinguished scholars, gathered under the sign of the British Academy, able to deliver on what they know best, but which (harshly perhaps) we might suggest is not necessarily new (if in finer grain, and satisfyingly so). My criticism, then, remains a political one: the 'myth' of interdisciplinarity is not taken seriously enough; the work fits all too comfortably with the *doxa* of academia and 'Barthes studies', which in his own time Barthes was all too

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aware of, suggesting even then it was time to change the 'object'. What stands outside of this book is potentially another one: one that writes *out from* an in(ter)disciplinary perspective, to challenge technocracy, to enable a broader constituency; a book which can speak *on from Barthes*, to speak up for what is at stake in the production and *pleasures* of knowledge today.

Notes

¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture', *Art Bulletin*, 77.4 (1995), 540–44 (p. 540).

² Irit Rogoff, 'Studying Visual Culture', in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 14–26 (p. 15).

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