

## ‘A Lot Done, More to Do’ – Barthes, Bertie and the ‘facteur Poujade’

In the recent French Presidential election campaign, one of the more interesting electoral posters for the right wing candidate, Jean- Marie Le Pen, featured the name of Le Pen under a red, white and blue rainbow, this distant vista being gazed upon by a statuesque, sword-bearing Joan of Arc. The militaristic pose is clearly designed to instil the belief that Le Pen is her natural successor and will fight for France, repelling the current wave of pan-European immigration in much the same manner as the illustrious Maid of Orleans did against the Anglophone aggressors in May, 1429. While it would undoubtedly take a larger and more powerful beast to maintain the bulk of Le Pen, the centrality of the image of Joan to the self-perception of Le Pen in the poster cannot be denied. The poster is maintaining a definitive link between the swashbuckling medieval defender of the French King Charles VII and the contemporary self-styled defender of everything French. Whether Le Pen also shares the voices in the head that apparently guided Joan on her often-bizarre adventures is open to some question but there can be little doubt that the connotative power of iconic imagery is central to all electoral campaigns. The instant appeal (or otherwise) of an image has to cut a swathe through the saturated media coverage in which public interest takes a decidedly downward spiral as the campaigns develop. Equally, the posters have to avoid a series of pitfalls that could prove potentially fatal, ranging from the danger of patronising the electorate to the avoidance of an air of over-confidence or desperation. Another poster favoured by Le Pen features a more traditional political pose, a serious besuited statesman gazing intently over the right shoulder of the viewer, almost encouraging the latter to look back over their shoulder to see what is catching the gaze of the great man. Of course all that is over the shoulder is that which is created by Le Pen’s gaze, an optical illusion that helps create the image of a man who can see beyond the quotidian and into the future. The viewer is

equally complicit in this production because, in most instances, they will be voters, important in large numbers but relatively insignificant on an individual basis. Le Pen's unexpected electoral success may have had more to do with apathy and discontent amongst the French electorate over the lack of a real alternative to the incumbent President Jacques Chirac, but the message presented by his slick campaign has a long tradition not in only French politics but is playing an increasingly important role in Irish politics also. This was manifested in the 2002 Irish general election, in which the traditional posters of local candidates were largely replaced in many local constituencies by single image posters of the current Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. What distinguished these posters from previous elections is that only the names of the local candidates, and not their images, appeared at the bottom of the big poster of Bertie. Clearly, Fianna Fáil felt that the image of the Taoiseach was its most powerful electoral weapon. In this image, Bertie is gazing solemnly, if somewhat disquietingly, at the viewer, minus jacket in true Tony Blair fashion, obviously at work, pausing for a photograph, with every intention of returning to the business of State as soon as possible. Despite his heavy make-up, Bertie appears to give the impression in the photo that the photographer has caught him somewhat unawares but is clearly unperturbed by the imposition. The minor interruption of the democratic mandate does not faze him. The now infamous moniker, 'A Lot Done, More to Do', re-emphasises Ahern's desire to get back to what he feels he does best. Indeed, the moniker itself is interesting in that it supplies a Janus-faced statement of time, the key link between the past and future evidently being Ahern himself. He consequently operates in every dimension, a no-nonsense Time Lord whose hard work, expressed in the simplest of terms, is directly responsible for the level of economic prosperity in the country. By flanking him with clauses invoking the past and the future, the poster allows for no other interpretation than the centrality of Ahern in the Irish present, his presence the crucial link between the success of the past and the projected success of the future. He literally is continuity.

In his seminal collection of essays entitled *Mythologies*,<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes examined the codings that he perceived as underpinning the

1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973). Subsequent references to this edition will be in parenthesis.

various manifestations of high and low French culture. From red wine to wrestling, Barthes analysed the signifying systems that govern popular perceptions of, and reactions to, a whole series of cultural phenomena in 1950's France with what Terry Eagleton refers to as 'effortless brio'<sup>2</sup>. The book is perhaps one of the most accessible and popular examples of high structuralism in which Barthes adopts an inquisitive journalistic style, quite different in tone to his later more complex deconstructive analyses of literary texts. The book ranges over a variety of social, cultural and political events that took place in France in the early 1950's, and while nearly all of the essays have a specifically French context, many, including those on the demise of the French imperial exercise, touch universal chords in contemporary cultures. Building upon Ferdinand De Saussure's early 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistic theory that language was conceptual rather than referential, as previously held, Barthes develops the key concept of a second order of signification founded on a primary order of the relationship between the sign, signifier and signified. Accepting the Saussurian model of the manufacture of the signified as an initial hermeneutical construction, Barthes allows these primary signs to be seen in the wider context of popular culture where their manifestation is subjected to a variety of forces that alter its popular perception. For example, the now famous and universally regarded Citroen DS, first manufactured in 1955, becomes more than the sum of its mechanical parts, its design and assembly incorporating a new blend of metal and glass that transforms the mass manufactured panels and windows into a vehicle imbued with a unique cultural significance, and Barthes's description of the car provides a template for his analysis of a variety of cultural manifestations:

There are in the DS the beginnings of a new phenomenology of assembling, as if one progressed from a world where elements are welded to a world where they are juxtaposed and hold together by sole virtue of their wondrous shape (*Mythologies*, 88-9)

One of these essays is entitled 'Photography and Electoral Appeal' and in it Barthes engages in a classic semiotic analysis of parliamentary election posters from various campaigns in the early 1950's in France. Amongst

2 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory – An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p.135.

these, the images of the St. Cere shopkeeper, Pierre Poujade, stand out. Poujade, now 81, is still the leader of the shopkeepers and craftsmen union, the *Union pour la Défense des Commerçants et Artisans* [UDCA] and his Poujadist party attracted 2.6 million votes (over 11% of the entire vote cast) and won 53 seats in the 1956 French general election before being wiped out by De Gaulle's spectacular return in 1958. Amongst those 53 seats at the Palais Bourbon was the 28-year-old Jean-Marie Le Pen, France's recent right-wing Presidential candidate and founder of the National Front. Barthes submits Poujade's posters to a revealing semiotic scrutiny in which the 'Look at me: I am like you' slogan predominates, encouraging the voter to elect a mirror of the self, a figure whose photograph speaks most deeply and empathetically to the perceived and often manipulated core values of the voter. 'Worker of France!' appealed the Poujadist literature, 'now that this magnificent struggle is joined, of the small people against the predators, do not forget that our interest is yours.' (<http://archive.workersliberty.org.uk/wl/mags/wl66/poujade.htm>).

Electoral posters are complex and influential media productions. Their role is obviously to engrain the name of the respective political party and their candidates in the minds of voters as they drive, shop, commute, play and walk. The posters contain a certain amount of factual information but most of this is already known. What are far more significant are the multiple signifiers that the posters contain, images and icons carefully chosen for their saturated and multivalent meanings. The appeal of the posters has to be both wide enough to recognise that the electoral mandate covers a large variety of social-economic groupings in a range of urban and rural locations, and narrow enough to satisfy the demands of the respective political party's natural and reliable electoral support. Given this dual mandate, the complexity of political choice is largely elided in favour of carefully manufactured images of either the individual local candidate or, as particularly noticeable in the last Irish general election, an image of the party leader. In his essay, Barthes identifies the key semiotic message underpinning electoral photography:

What is transmitted through the photograph of the candidate are not his plans, but his deep motives, all his family, mental, even erotic circumstances, all this style of life of which he is at once the product, the example, the bait. (*Mythologies*, 91).

In the Irish general election of 2002, the largest party in the State, Fianna Fáil, embarked on the most expensive campaign in Irish electoral history. Each candidate was entitled to spend just over €38,000 on election expenses, a large chunk of which was siphoned off to create the poster saturation that is such a feature of Irish general elections. Fianna Fáil's main election poster featured the then and present Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, seated at his Prime Ministerial desk in Leinster House, firmly ensconced in the very heart of democratic political power. On his right, the green, white and gold tricolour languidly and voluptuously envelops the space between him and the border of the picture, firmly establishing Bertie as the centre and the flag as the accessory. This is obviously his territory and he is resolutely in place in the centre of all the activity of government. Bertie stares back at the viewer, full face, gaze intent, the fist of the right hand cradled in the cupping grip of the left, hinting strongly at two sides to the man – tough when has to be but able to control this aggression when the need arises, a man for all seasons. Equally, the hands are given a prominent position in the image, intoning a doer, a hands-on politician who is not some mere intellectual but someone who has experience of practical labour. Bertie is implying that nothing gets done unless some hand is applied to the task. He is offering his hands for just such labour. However, Bertie's somewhat skewed and disconcerting gaze is deliberately constructed to separate this image from the populist 'man of the people' persona usually adopted by the current Taoiseach. In relation to Poujade's posters, Barthes identifies the rationale behind this dislocation:

The iconography is meant to signify the exceptional conjunction of thought and will, reflection and action: the slightly narrowed eyes allow a sharp look to filter through, which seems to find its strength in a beautiful inner dream without however ceasing to alight on real obstacles (*Mythologies*, 92).

However, Ahern's gaze in the poster is fractionally and disconcertingly off centre. He does not meet the viewer exactly eye to eye, but appears to be intently fixed on some object just over the viewer's left shoulder. This is an important distinction, in that Barthes claims that a direct eye-to-eye gaze 'expresses penetration, gravity' and a squaring up to 'the enemy, the obstacle, the "problem"' (*Mythologies*, 92). Perhaps the marginally off-centre perspective is a tacit admission that there are no real obstacles that

have to be faced down, that everything is under control. Given the relatively healthy state of the Irish economy in May 2002, and the inexorable progress towards a lasting political solution in Northern Ireland, Bertie has no real reason to look as if he has a mountain to conquer. Modest yet confident self-satisfaction is the poster's dominant semiotic emission. He has shed his jacket and the angle of the body and the head are those of someone who wants to portray himself as a sympathetic listener, counsellor, and friend. The viewer therefore has the impression that Bertie is nodding in empathetic agreement with the silent mutterings of the nameless voters. Bertie is looking, with suitable gravitas, into the tomb of the unknown voter, and here he sees, with sibylline foresight, that his future belongs with you, the viewer, and the enfranchised, in partnership with him. Interestingly, the shadow on his face, imitating some marble Roman bust, falls from left to right, indicating that the light is emanating from the left, from over the viewer's shoulder. Bertie, therefore, has his eyes firmly on the nourishing, life-giving light, to which he seems irresistibly drawn. However, in the semiotic system, he could just as easily be interpreted as being attracted, moth-like, to the light, transfixed in the glow of political power and unaware of the effort required to maintain it. However, the clasped fist cupped hands soon dispel any myth of complacency, in that these hands are plainly made for working. Ironically, if Bertie were to raise his arms above his head and maintain exactly the same handgrip, he would adopt an identical pose to that of Margaret Thatcher after her landslide election victory in 1983. Bertie is therefore clearly celebrating, but discreetly. The hands suggest a quiet jubilation with what has been done while the slightly futuristic gaze is obviously honing in on what is left to do. A lot done. More to do. Indeed, there is the tiniest trace of a smile on his lips, a burgeoning contentment welling up within him. The morphology, as Barthes would define it, is from the image of the Taoiseach to a nation content with itself. Like Bertie, Ireland has taken off its jacket, and can rest easy in its newfound economic and international confidence. As in most elections, the incumbent of an economically prosperous country often has to merely portray an impression of stability and continuity, which is perfectly captured in the poster's slogan. Perhaps not coincidentally, the main opposition party in the general election, Fine Gael, adopted a similar strategy of election postering by featuring their then leader, Michael Noonan, in full-face pose. However, the gravitas of the besuited Noonan, a politician noted

for his combative style, did not sit easily with the oozing self-assurance and casual competence of the Fianna Fáil leader. Noonan's face is heavily made-up and his earnest desire for power is palpable. Because of this, his gaze is almost that of a megalomaniac salivating over the tantalising closeness of political power rather than that of someone with the desired implied ability to manage that power. Both men were obviously made up carefully for their respective pictures and this artificiality certainly permeates the images. For the postered Noonan, the desire to win is conspicuous, and in the land of the unknown voter, that is potentially fatal. His image appears on the verge of toppling out of the poster and into the horrified lap of the viewer. His eyes appear close together, a wolf-like visage sitting atop a body that appears to be too large for the expensive suit it is residing in. Indeed, Barthes's identification that the 'narrowed eyes allow a sharp look to filter through' (*Mythologies*, 92) appears to work against Noonan as the narrowness of the eyes over-scrutinises the wearied viewer to the extent that Noonan appears almost accusatory. Observing this poster brings forth similar feelings to that experienced by arriving air travellers as they proceed through the 'Nothing to Declare' section of national customs. Catch the eye of a hovering uniformed customs official and guilt immediately fills the body language and the emanating semiotic field becomes that of someone with something to hide. Something as harmless as a bottle of Ouzo is transformed into a kilo of pure heroin under the perceived indifference of the official gaze. The casualness and apparent randomness of selection only heightens the desire to look away. Ironically, all the actions misguidedly designed to distract attention actually engender an apprehensive feeling of intangible and irrational guilt. Noonan's poster engenders precisely the same feeling of unease. The stare is too intense, with his over-eager, almost critical bad cop sitting uncomfortably with Ahern's casual, breezy good cop routine. Interestingly, the revamping of Fine Gael's image after their disastrous election showing included the smiling visage of new leader Enda Kenny, whose recent pictures appear to be lifted out of a ubiquitous American College yearbook featuring the boy most likely to succeed. Fine Gael would at least appear to have learned one semiotic lesson from their crushing electoral defeat: Do not look too intently at the electorate, as they do not want to feel like they are under the microscope.

Because of what Barthes refers to as the essentially 'elitist' nature of politics, the candidate's poster almost inevitably emanates a whiff of

'paternalism' (*Mythologies*, 91), and the viewer accepts this in that it is precisely for this self-confidence that the electorate elect in the first place. However, liberal democracy is predicated on the foundation, however illusory, that power is essentially in the hands of the electorate. Therefore those who hold power are mere custodians of the majority collective will rather than divinely born natural leaders. The idea that anyone can theoretically become Taoiseach fills Ahern's posters with a mix of confidence, *savoir-faire* and a modicum of signified gratitude that an ordinary Dublin bloke could have come so far. However, this gratitude has to be clearly understated as any overstatement might lead to the dangerous conclusion that anyone *could* actually attain the highest political office. As usual in cultural discourses, it is essential to maintain the illusion of equality of opportunity while covertly disseminating relatively subtle signs that the ancient regime of political influence and bourgeois ideologies are alive and well and directing affairs. Leaving the qualifying criteria as loose as possible nourishes the concept of an open meritocracy but these criteria soon come to sharp relief when the system is tested in any serious manner. There is a strong parallel between this semiotic balance and the menus to be found in restaurants throughout the world. The more complicated the menu, the more sophisticated the customer. There is an agreed, implied knowledge of culinary terms and ingredients in which easy to prepare food is masqueraded as some form of artistic creation. In much the same way that the poster speaks to the voter, the complicated restaurant menu speaks to the discernment of the diner, the over-elaboration of the former a testament to the peacocking of the latter.

The poster wants the viewer to believe what might appear to be a contradiction, that the candidate is indeed one of us whilst simultaneously set apart by the weight of the burden of public office. The Irish National Lottery operates under the slogan 'It Could Be You', despite the fact that it should read: 'It Almost Assuredly Will not be You', and it is precisely this message that Ahern's poster and slogan attempts to communicate. The key to understanding democracy is that every vote counts, however many millions compose the electorate. Posters, therefore, have to perform a careful semiotic high-wire act, balancing the candidate's ordinary recognisable humanity with the distant gravitas of matters of state. Indeed, this implied gravitas has recently been enforced by the Irish government's decision to reel in the availability of cabinet papers under the Freedom of Information Act from 5 to 10 years, indicating that the



level of distrust from politicians towards the electorate who place them there in the first place is perhaps something else the poster creators have to consider when constructing their images. Bertie may be one of us, but we can't read what he says about us until long after we have forgotten what he was talking about in the first place. However, it would be an over-simplification to suggest that this leader-mania is a relatively recent phenomenon. Fianna Fáil election posters have long featured their leader's various visages as key electoral tools, from the serious iconic statesmanship of Eamon De Valera to the smiling, confident, vaguely modern Seán Lemass. Bertie is merely one in a long line and it is interesting to note that the images of him that were chosen during the crucial election year consistently maintained this personality cult. On the cover of the programme for the 2002 Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis, for example, Bertie is pictured seated in a sleek, executive, black, slightly reclining leather chair. It is evening, and the dramatic setting sun forms an ambient backdrop to the sharp streetlights of the city of Dublin. Prominent in the background are two buildings whose calculated inclusion in the picture is there to reinforce what Bertie is trying to get across in the image. The new Smithfield Chimney Tower, a symbol of the regeneration of a previously deprived area of Dublin, rises through the cool evening mist while the Guinness Brewery, symbolic of tradition and old business, as well as a new laddish cool, illuminates the foreground. Indeed, there is even an echo of the recent Lord of the Rings film, *The Two Towers*, with the turreted chimney rising above all around it but still dwarfed by the dominant figure of Sauron, aka Bertie. In this image he appears to float over the city in that the backdrop is noticeably designed to appear as if it is a window of a tall building but this window has no frames. Again, Bertie is cool and confident with the word 'future' featuring prominently in the logo beneath the image. Bertie is on the verge of a smile, a look of quiet contentment creeps across his features in much the same way as in the electoral poster. He is fully besuited in this picture, hands again clasped but this time in a more relaxed interlocked finger mode as if his work for the day is done and now is the time to relax a little. Interestingly, the picture reverses the traditional acknowledgment of the taken-off jacket as a symbol of relaxation with Bertie reverting to a full suit in the evening. The semiology of this particular reversal is that the Taoiseach is in fact relaxed at work and the suit portrays a man who knows how to relax (the reclining chair) but not to the extent that he loses the focus on self-

control. It may be evening, the sun is setting, the city nightlife is about to get into swing, and there is Bertie, serene and calm and looking out for his city, a Louis Copeland dressed Batman for the metropolis. Barthes notes that the political right have a myth that is 'well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous' (*Mythologies*, 148) and certainly the iconography of this image is of a high order of signification, both personally and geographically. For a party conference brochure, it crushes any internal opposition with its almost dictatorial air of control. However, the design contains quite a few semiotic booby traps, which were, one imagines, unintentional. The logo at the bottom of the image is 'Working for the Future Together', yet the image contains only one person and a photograph of the centre of Dublin. So who is working together, exactly? Bertie and the city? Again, it would appear that Bertie is appealing, as he did in the poster, directly to the observer of the image, more than likely to be a member of Fianna Fáil. Of the implied duality of togetherness, only Bertie is assured of his place. The viewer is again anonymous in the face of the myth of the Taoiseach. The image is one of Bertie absolutely at the centre of all things, the city, the party, the future, the *constant* in the political equation – Bertie plus  $n$  equals government. The setting sun, however, gives perhaps a small clue as to the difficulties soon faced after the election both by Fianna Fáil and Ahern when clear election promises in key areas such as health and education began to disintegrate because of deteriorating public finances. Indeed, despite their electoral success, Fianna Fáil fell one seat short of an overall majority, and the 'together' moniker could well be Ahern's tacit acknowledgement that he will never lead a single party Fianna Fáil government and is destined instead to share power with unspecified political allies.

In the final series of essays in the collection, Barthes expounds more directly on his perception of the transformative powers of myth. One of the foundational principles behind bourgeois mythology is identified by Barthes as 'the refusal of explanation' (*Mythologies*, 154) that is built in to apparently universally held values and core social, cultural and political institutions. Because bourgeois society invariably has much to gain from the maintenance of the socio-political system that it has brought about, the level of political debate usually revolves around who is perceived, at any given time, to most universally embody these unarticulated, self-interested ironically liminal core values. However, central to Barthes's concept of myth is what could be referred to as its cuckoo

quality, namely its ability to recreate a space it has surreptitiously occupied. In this schema, the myth of Bertie that the poster emanates elevates the individual beyond the symbolic and into the realm of the actual: Bertie is, at one and the same time, the ultimate symbol of political success and, due to the transformative power of myth, he is the very 'presence' (*Mythologies*, 128) of Irish political power. Barthes refers to the 'dynamic' (*Mythologies*, 128) transformative power of mythological systems where the object of signification, in this instance Bertie Ahern, transcends the symbolic and enters the realms of fact. Thus the semiotic nature of the posters is distorted by the 'myth-consumer' (*Mythologies*, 131) into what appears to be a factual system. Ironically, members of parliament are often referred to as 'public representatives', indicating that they are not in themselves real but representative of a larger collective ideology that they appear to personify. This is a crucial distinction because in the political semiotic system the 'representatives' soon *become* the system itself, clear examples of Barthes's transcendent of the symbolic. Ahern's ubiquitous visage, therefore, is presented as the actual, real tangible manifestation of the democratic system and the inherent danger of allowing one man such personal power is elided by the careful construction of semiotically loaded images and the constant use of soothing political shibboleths.

Election posters, innocuous as they may appear to be, are an important tool in the construction of one of the central myths of the political spectrum, namely the timeless given of the centrality of leadership and the myth of personality in the democratic process. Barthes identifies 'language-robbery' (*Mythologies*, 131) as a defining characteristic of every mythological system and election posters, due to their reliance on the instantaneous image of the individual, exemplify this dialogical cat-burglary. The myth is transferred to the consumer in the blink of an eye and it requires no more than the briefest glance to off-load its signification. Indeed, Barthes argues that 'a more attentive reading of the myth will in no way increase its power or effectiveness' (*Mythologies*, 130) and the usual position of the poster up a telegraph pole only adds to the vulnerability of the myth consumer. Indeed, the semiotic 'language-robbery' inherent in the poster's design is increasingly reflected in a relatively recent development in television news, pioneered by both Sky and CNN, where the information overload of television news now comprises a talking head, a concurrent moving text about a different subject at the

bottom of the screen and a tabloidesque red-top of breaking news, again different to the main story. In Barthes's paradigm the inference can be drawn that either none of the news being broadcast is of enough significance to merit individual treatment or that the news consumer is so wearied by information overload that multi-media multi-story news is all that will extend an apparently faded attention span. However, one could also draw the more sinister conclusion that more is indeed less, a breadth of puerile coverage substituting any real analysis of what is happening, thus neatly avoiding any embarrassing politicisation of current affairs.

Barthes's analysis of the pervasive influence of myth in a variety of guises is as prescient in contemporary Irish society as it was in 1950's France. The attempted deconstruction of central cultural icons is essential if an understanding is to emerge as to how the myth-consumer is manipulated by the nascent forces that appear to shape a largely apathetic society into an easily manipulated whole. Although myth itself is transferred almost instantaneously, its deconstruction is a more complicated process. Barthes identifies the key ontological concern:

This is what we must seek: reconciliation between reality and men, between description and knowledge, between object and knowledge (*Mythologies*, 159).