

# Description Degree Zero and the Un-Reality Effect: Roland Barthes on Description

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*In his work, Roland Barthes raises the issue of description several times in a context that appears to be connected to the equally recurrent theme of the resistance to meaning. Barthes explored the function of description in two major fields of study: the field of fictional narratives and the field of visual signs. My paper focuses on the former in order to trace Barthes's theoretically divergent accounts regarding description's function and the presence of insignificant detail in narrative texts. Firstly, I analyze how Barthes attributed an ideology-critical function to description and the superfluous detail in critical debates that took place in the 1950s in connection to the French Nouveau Roman. Following this, my study focuses on the new position occupied by description in Barthes's structural narrative theory. In the last section of the paper, the notion of reality effect, more precisely, the way in which Barthes transforms and redefines the function of seemingly insignificant details in a narrative as operators for the autonomy of textual signifiers is examined.*

Keywords: narratology / narrative structure / description / insignificant details / ideological criticism / reality effect / cultural semiotics / Barthes, Roland

## **Description in the work of Barthes: narratology and cultural semiotics**

The concept of description as a literary sub-genre, a unit of the narrative division of labor in the realist novel, or an illustrative example of the discrepancy (and the poetic possibilities ensuing therein) between image and text, the visual and the linguistic seems too old-fashioned of a vision for a literary and cultural critic who is justly regarded as revolutionary. In spite of this apparent discrepancy, the question of description haunted Roland Barthes throughout his career. The recurring conceptualizations of description dating from different periods in his work

indicate a path in which description articulates the theme of *resistance to meaning* within different theoretical frames. This theme belongs presumably to “the author’s personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place, where once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed” (Barthes, *Writing* 10), to borrow Barthes’s own eloquent words from his very first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953). This protean thematic in Barthes’s oeuvre is obviously beyond the scope of my study which instead focuses on how Barthes attributed meaning (or a resistance to meaning) to description within different theoretical and historical contexts during his life’s work. While at first glance the issue of description may seem to possess merely a minor role, it is my contention that analyzing Barthes’s attention to this topic will provide greater insight into the evolution of his intellectual position over time.

Description is a composite notion in Barthes’s texts that is able to conceptualize ideological, narrative and semiotic problems as well. From a literary and semiotic standpoint, description seems to be linked to two major problematics in the work of Barthes, namely to problems of narrative representations on the one hand, and problems of visual representations on the other hand. In connection to a topic that I will analyze in the largest section of my paper, some of Barthes’s writings first of all focus directly on literary description’s function in a narrative construction. In an extension of this concept, I examine descriptions which are parts of narrative texts (rather than independent textual units such as portraits, descriptions of work of arts or *ekphrasis* that are exempted from narrative function) including descriptions of objects, venues, decor, spaces or visual perceptions experienced by characters belonging to a fictional universe. Papers such as “Objective Literature” containing Barthes’s reading of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Les gommages* (*The Erasers* in English translation), or his “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” one of the most influential texts in French structuralist narratology as well as “The Reality Effect” particularly strive to define the possible roles description possesses in the general system of the signification of a narrative. Although these approaches to literary descriptions stem from different theoretical frames and are written with different theoretical goals in mind, all devote special attention to cases in which a description located in a particular narrative appears either superfluous or dysfunctional based on the semiotic model of the system of narrative signification. When Barthes evokes *The Erasers*’ “anthological descriptions” by claiming that anthological descriptions are “entitled to take up our time regardless of the

appeals which the dialectic of the narrative may make to it” (Barthes, “Objective” 13–14), defines the “marginal functionality” of “informants” as authenticating “the reality of the referent, root fiction in the real world” in his structuralist narratology (Barthes, “An Introduction” 249) or investigates (in *The Reality Effect*) the narrative and semiotic function of insignificant details in a narrative, in each case Barthes seeks a structural explanation (whether narrative, rhetoric, aesthetic or semiotic in nature) regarding the presence of seemingly meaningless descriptive textual representations in narrative. Why it is so important for Barthes to solve this problem is easily understandable: in both of his theoretically divergent, narratological works—including both the aforementioned “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” (1966) and *S/Z* published three years later in 1969—Barthes supposes that there is no “pause of signification,” whether we conceive the narrative as a closed or open textual entity or not. Subsequently, finding any seemingly superfluous or meaningless textual unit which neither moves the plot forward (meaning that, in semiotic terms, the unit does not have a correlative counterpart in the syntagmatic organization of the plot), nor takes part in the construction of characters or the fictional milieu of the story is unacceptable.

Roland Barthes’s cultural semiotics is another fertile field to which the topic of description could be connected. From his *Mythologies* (1953) written at the beginning of his career to his last book, *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes never lost a fascination—irrespective of their cultural medium or manifestation, such as advertisements, Hollywood movies, fashion or photography—for the social meaning and usage of visual codes. In his cultural semiotic analysis of visual objects, Barthes follows a process that bears great similarity to his approach regarding narratives: after classifying the signifiers and their possible connections according to linguistic models borrowed from Saussure, Benveniste and Hjelmslev, he then describes the most important ways in which socially encoded meanings are to be read. In his approach to the visual system of signs, Barthes once again happens upon the same dysfunctional elements he had originally encountered in his studies of narrative: signifiers which may be challenging to integrate into the general semiotic process of signification. In his “The Rhetoric of Image,” Barthes postulates a “non-coded iconic message” whose function resembles that possessed by informants and the reality effect: it is responsible for the verisimilitude of the socio-cultural representation, or artifact, and assures the reader or the spectator regarding the represented object’s very existence. To be more precise, a “non-coded iconic message” reaf-

firms the “*having-been-there*” of the represented object. While the semiotic organization of culturally readable connotations creates the meaning of visual representation, the “message without a code,” or in other words, the pure denoted image, does not belong to the semiotic process of the signification (cf. Barthes, “The Rhetoric” 36). In another essay entitled “The Photographic Message,” Barthes labels this paradoxical resistance to the (semiotic) meaning as “photographic insignificance” (“The Photographic” 27), a term he later elaborated upon in greater detail in his *Camera Lucida* under the name of “*punctum*.”

My brief overview of the theories surrounding description that are found in the work of Roland Barthes suggests that the question of description—understood as a verbal or visual re-presentation of a fictional or real visually perceivable reality within an artifact—is associated with Barthes’ exploration of the limitations surrounding a semiotic approach of narrative, textual, or visual representations. In my following examination, I only analyze Barthes’s theoretical writings that focus on description’s various roles in narrative literary texts.

## Description and ideological criticism

In Barthes’s career, the matter of the description emerges for the first time in the 1950s. With his essays, “Objective Literature” and “Literal Literature,” works which examined Alain Robbe-Grillet’s early novels, *Les gommes* and *Le voyeur*, Barthes’s writings not only played a key role in the critical debates surrounding the French “Nouveau Roman,” but also helped Robbe-Grillet better articulate the critical novelty of his own works. These two novels by Robbe-Grillet had been vehemently attacked by supporters of *engaged literature* who blamed *The Erasers* and *The Voyeur* for representing an alienated, reified and dehumanized world that thereby supported a bourgeois-capitalist ideology. From the perspective of a Marxist critique, the lengthy descriptions found in *Les gommes* or *Le voyeur*—lacking the good intentions of the realist novel to instruct the reader regarding how things work in the social, technical world—perfectly illustrate the rule of the object (goods) over human conscience, the rule of space over time. For representatives of the leftist critical tradition a nineteenth-century realist novel’s meticulous usage of description was already regarded as a “strategy of a bourgeoisie threatened by social practice and anxious to escape condemnation” by “reifying and petrifying everything.” According to this interpretation, works by Robbe-Grillet as well as those written by other figures

from the Nouveau Roman literary movement were nothing less than examples of the amplification of the social-historical process mentioned above (cf. Rancière, *Le fil* 20).<sup>1</sup> In his refutation of this interpretation by leftist critics, Barthes (later followed by Robbe-Grillet) denied the existence of any sort of continuity with the realist, “bourgeois,” tradition of description, while simultaneously defending the experiments carried out by the Nouveau Roman. In essence, Barthes rejected the utilitarian definition of literature as a tool meant to aid the evolution of the public’s political consciousness via the representation of exploitation and class-struggle.

In defense of his views, Barthes employs a surprisingly persuasive strategy rooted in poetical and philosophical arguments in his detailed analysis of some descriptive sections of *The Erasers*. The descriptions chosen by Barthes concern a dish served to the protagonist and a meeting between a hitman and his employer that takes place in a nearly empty room. Barthes’s analysis mainly focuses on (1) how the function of the objects has changed in Robbe-Grillet’s novels (in relation to the realist novel), (2) what kind of ideological consequences stem from their modified status and (3) what kind of narrative (and poetic) tools are employed during the textual constitution of these fictional objects. Although the theoretical framework used in “Objective Literature” precedes Barthes’s structural-semiotic model of the narrative, it is quite obvious that Barthes has nevertheless already formulated one of his recurrent hypotheses regarding modern descriptions which resist the encompassing narrative system of meaning. According to Barthes, Robbe-Grillet’s descriptions do not (or hardly) participate in the narrative task of moving the plot forward or depicting a social context in which the characters act, thereby allowing the description to be reintegrated into an upper level of the narrative meaning. Apparently, Robbe-Grillet’s famous anthological pieces with their meticulous, geometrical, quantitative descriptions of foods, furniture and rooms are too voluminous in relation to their role in the narrative. Unlike the strategy realist novels employed in the nineteenth century, the lengthy depictions of a slice of tomato or a nearly empty interior do not help the reader to understand the social or psychological laws which govern their “real world” any better. As Barthes claims, “Robbe-Grillet’s object has neither function nor substance” (Barthes, “Objective” 15) and what he means by function in

<sup>1</sup> My translation. In his reading of *The Reality Effect*, Jacques Rancière also attributes the critique of the bourgeois-capitalist cultural production to Barthes.

this instance is the role possessed by the described object within narrative meaning.

Beyond these pre-narratology observations, Barthes also views Robbe-Grillet's descriptions as presenting a dilemma concerning the theory of language. According to Barthes, the depiction of the objects in Robbe-Grillet's novels proposes a new way of thinking about the relationship between language and reality in fiction. It must be mentioned that this dilemma actually extends back to Sartre's work *Nausea*, in which description (especially that of the chestnut tree at the end of the novel) stages dramatic scenes that highlight the discrepancy between the intelligible and constructed nature of reality as represented in human consciousness (what Sartre calls "essence") and the sensual experience of this reality which Sartre recognized as something independent of consciousness ("existence"). A state of existential vertigo grips *Nausea*'s protagonist when he realizes the epistemological gap between a reality conceptualized by the intelligible nature of the human consciousness (with its teleologically constructed concepts) and raw, unintelligible, empirical and sensorial reality. Roquentin, the hero of the *Nausea*, feels threatened by this weird, purely material reality whose amorphous chaos could only be controlled and mastered by the arbitrary, but necessary inner order of an artistic composition, the only remedy against the attacks of vertigo for him is the small jazz melody he heard oftentimes being played during his crisis.

Both Barthes's two essays and Robbe-Grillet's early novels are embroiled in a polemic with this Sartrean view as found in his work *Nausea*. In *The Erasers* descriptions are anything but expressions of a tragic hero's dramatic encounters with the epistemological rupture between essence and existence. While Robbe-Grillet's novel and Barthes's essays do not deny that objects possess an essentially different nature compared to the consciousness which can form ideas of them, they both contend that this difference or sense of strangeness does not trigger any feeling of anxiety or disgust. As Robbe-Grillet states, "there exists something in the world which is not man, which makes no sign to him, which has nothing in common with him" (Robbe-Grillet, "Nature" 52). According to Barthes's analysis, the narrative art of *The Erasers* stresses a separation between descriptive consciousness and described reality both on the level of narration as well as on that of narrated consciousness; in the end, neither the protagonist nor the reader experiences the famous, ontological nausea related in Sartre's novel. Unlike Sartre's first-person, autodiegetic narration, the heterodiegetic, third-person narration in *The Erasers* reduces the possibility for the emergence of a central, "tragic" consciousness.

At this point in the debate, the argumentation of the defenders of Nouveau roman turns from a phenomenological approach of fictional objects' descriptions to ideological criticism. Robbe-Grillet argues that his descriptive technique is a part of his critique against an anthropomorphic viewpoint and the resigned humanism manifested in both the classical as well as the existentialist novel. (By humanism Robbe-Grillet is referring to the bourgeois myth of the eternal human essence, which serves as a philosophical principle for maintaining the social order.) Inspired by Barthes's essay on his own novel, Robbe-Grillet contends that his descriptions aim "to reject the 'pananthropic' notion contained in traditional humanism, and probably in all humanism" (Robbe-Grillet, "Nature" 57). To achieve this goal, Robbe-Grillet represents fictional objects almost exclusively by their visual appearance in order to avoid using metaphors which he considers to be vehicles for forging a kinship between mankind and the material world. Thus, according to Robbe-Grillet, his flat and sober, non-anthropomorphic descriptions prevent establishing an intimacy between man and things, and also the constitution of a tragic (modern) consciousness from the feeling of their separation.

Robbe-Grillet criticizes the intellectual position which he believes complicitly accepts the "human condition," and its artistic manifestation in the notion of "tragedy" and consequently abandons the possibility of developing new ideas to change these conditions. With these two arguments, Robbe-Grillet strikes back at the progressive critique which accuses him of being reactionary. Barthes, in turn, further expands a political, ideological defense of the Nouveau Roman by studying the critical function of the descriptions of fictional objects. On the one hand, Barthes points out that the representation of classical fictional objects functions as a mirror for the human gaze, in which the subject either glorifies his own superior position, or the very same fictional object might become an allegory for the fate of all humans, a "vehicle of a melodrama; it decays, vanishes, or recovers a final glory, participates in short in a veritable eschatology of matter" (Barthes, "Objective" 20). On the other hand, Barthes also argues that neutral, impersonal descriptions lacking virtually any social or psychological type of marker establish a metacritical position. According to Barthes, Robbe-Grillet's descriptions do not refer to any fictional or non-fictional externality as their function is to form a linguistic obstacle to the reader in that they are entirely self-referential and therefore do not witness the existence of anything beyond their own linguistic reality. Narrative formalism and linguistic self-referentiality try "to aseptinize the very form of narrative, it is per-

haps preparing, without yet achieving, a deconditioning of the reader in relation to the essentialist art of the bourgeois novel” (Barthes, “Literal” 57). With this interpretation, Barthes puts the famous impersonal and allegedly alienated descriptive technique, the zero degree of description of the Nouveau roman, in the service of ideological criticism.

## **Description and structuralist narratology**

The issues surrounding description occur in a more traditionally theoretical context in Barthes’s texts written in the mid-sixties, particularly in relation to the work, “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative.” This study figured as the opening paper in the eighth issue of the journal *Communications*, which contained studies by authors such as Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Bremond, Umberto Eco and Julien Greimas and was later viewed as the collective debut of French literary structuralism in narratology. “An Introduction” is often referred to as a keystone work supporting the field of structuralist narratology due to its proposal to apply Saussurean semiotics systematically to the field of narratives by separating narrative signifiers (*signifiant*) from the signified (*signifié*), thereby defining narrative units (what Barthes labels as “functions” in accordance with Propp) and their possible relationships in a semiotic interpretation of narrative meaning. To understand description’s new position within this narratological framework, it is first necessary to outline some of the most important concepts underlying Barthes’s structural narrative theory.

Indeed, Barthes does not study the question of description under this name in his narrative study. He proposes a general, systematic model for the narrative meaning, one that is destined to replace the old rhetorical and taxonomical approach which examines the traditional parts of a narrative separately. Nevertheless, Barthes did not cease to be interested in how objects of a fictional universe become meaningful, including how they participate in the production of the meaning. Within his new, narratological framework, Barthes replaces and redefines the issue of description as one that falls under the category of narrative information. When he defines the elementary units of narrative meaning (the “functions”), Barthes focuses mainly on “two broad classes of functions, distributional on the one hand, integrative on the other” (Barthes, “An Introduction” 246). Indeed, he limits the name “function” to the former, while “indices” (*index* in the French text) refer to the latter. Whether they are indispensable for the coherence

of the story (“cardinal functions”), or have a complementary role in building it (“catalyses”), “[t]he functions in this specific sense now correlate with units on the same level,” while indices “cannot be fulfilled without switching to another level” (Barthes, “An Introduction” 246). Furthermore, “they can be saturated (completed) only on the level of characters or on the level of narration” (Barthes, “An Introduction” 249). It may be said that “indices” possess a narrative function in order to lend a third, vertical dimension to the fictional universe (the second, horizontal dimension is provided by the deployment of the plot) and are responsible for creating a “worldlike” fictional universe in which narrative events take place. Similarly, indices are also responsible for creating a metaphorical network in the text. Barthes divides the category of indices into two subclasses: “indices proper, referring to a personality trait, a feeling or an atmosphere” and *informant*, “used to identify and pinpoint certain elements of time and space.” Indices “always signify implicitly, while informants do not ... they provide pure locally relevant data” (Barthes, “An Introduction” 249).

The question remains concerning how descriptions fit within this new conceptual frame offered by the structural analysis. One of the basic hypotheses held by the semiotic approach to narratives is that narrative units cannot be identified with textual units. A textual unit (textual signifier) can comprise several narrative units (narrative signifier), while a narrative unit can be composed of several textual units. The traditional economy of description and narration made famous by nineteenth-century realist novels, that utilize a clear textual separation between descriptive and narrative passages, cannot be operational from a semiotic perspective. From this vantage point, description appears to cease to exist as an independent sub-genre or even literary dilemma. Obviously, descriptions could be defined as indices with high integrative function since they aid the reader’s ability to understand the upper level of characters and actions by contributing to the understanding of the behavior and the deeds of characters. According to this interpretation, indices add to the creation of a socio-historical space, which thereby motivates the plot; in other words, descriptions possess psychological or social referents (“signified”). Yet descriptions can also be viewed as informants since they are there “to authenticate the reality of the referent, to root fiction in the real world” (Barthes, “An Introduction” 249). Within this capacity, descriptions possess a reduced functionality in the general economy of narrative meaning; in other words, they keep the self-referentiality—without their critical or political function—which was emphasized in the essays examining Robbe-Grillet’s novels in the 1950s.

## Reality effect

The question of description and its narrative function reappears a few years later in Barthes's oeuvre. His *Reality Effect* (1968) reestablishes the study of the description as an autonomous literary problem while questioning it from a double perspective that is both historical and narratological: what type of reasons underlie the different historical practices of descriptions and in what form do these ideas persist—if they do at all—in contemporary (the late sixties) fictional and non-fictional writings? What is the function of the “insignificant detail,” and what is “the ultimate significance of the insignificance” “detached from the semiotic structure of the narrative” (Barthes, *Reality* 12) in many modern and classical, fictional and non-fictional narratives? These questions (the latter in particular) are directly rooted in what Barthes discussed under the label of *informant* in his structuralist approach to narratives. However, at this point in his interpretation, the structuralist presupposition of the work of art as a closed totality (meaning that no narrative signifier is superfluous) serves only as point of departure in order to arrive at a more radical critique of the semiotic account of narrative fiction.

Barthes extends the history of description back to the rhetorical genre of the epideictic discourse from antiquity. He argues that to some extent the early forms of the description were already exempted from the general communicative aims of rhetorical speech. According to Barthes, the most illustrious historical form of the description, the *ekphrasis*, was not subordinated to any referential verisimilitude, which was later known as realism; rather it was mainly guided by discursive rules and constraints. Predominant in classical pieces of description, the autotelic, aesthetic function is still strongly recognizable in realist descriptions. By analyzing the description of Rouen in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Barthes points out that “the entire description *is constructed* ... to associate Rouen with a painting: it is a painted scene taken on by language,” and the meaning of the description “is given by its conformity, not to the object of description, but to the cultural rules governing representation” (Barthes, “The Reality” 13). The aesthetic organization of the descriptive textual unit frames a smooth transformation from a visual realm to a linguistic one both in the case of classical and realist descriptions; “if it was not subject to aesthetic or rhetorical choice, any ‘seeing’ would be inexhaustible by discourse” (14). Realist descriptions take advantage of their implicit claim on the noble tradition of classical descriptive art, thereby justifying the presence of long, detachable textual parts and details that seem to be “superfluous”

within the narrative structure of a work of art. However, in nineteenth-century realist fiction (as well as non-fiction) the “aesthetic plausibility” of the description “is totally interwoven with the imperatives of ‘realism’” (14), understood in this case as principally the predominant denotative usage of the language.

At this point Barthes once more reformulates one of the recurrent topics in his work that he had already interpreted in his essay analyzing Robbe-Grillet and his writings on photography (which he additionally developed later on in his *Camera Lucida*). According to Barthes, the goal behind representing the “concrete reality” and “insignificant detail” in realist prose is to inform the reader regarding the existence of a thing (or its former existence) and not to endow it with qualities and meaning. The “‘representation of reality,’ a naked account of ‘what is’ (or was), thus looks like a resistance to meaning” (14). This realist representation of “the ‘real’ is assumed not to need any independent justification, that is powerful enough to negate any notion of ‘function,’ that it can be expressed without there being any need for it to be integrated into a structure, and the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient reason for speaking of them” (15). Barthes supposes that the notion of *vraisemblable* (verisimilitude) went through a cultural transformation from antiquity to realism. In classical culture the *vraisemblable* is “general and not particular” and “never other than the thinkable ... entirely subject to the (public) opinion” (15). In modern realism, however, this intelligible world seems artificially arranged and opposed to a “raw” reality which might be expressed by markers of the “reality” that are restricted to reporting the existence of their referent.

According to this new, modern order of representation, the markers of reality are those signifiers in a narrative whose function is reduced to asserting and confirming the *vraisemblance* of the narrated universe itself. Descriptive details which do not refer to any narrative signified, which could not be integrated into the semiotic structure of the narrative “say ... only this: *we are the real*” (16). This is precisely what Barthes calls the “reality effect” (*effet de réel*). From a semiotic vantage point he defines the superfluous details as narrative signifiers which do not have any “signifié” (meaning that they are not integrated into a higher level of signification), but only referents. However, as a final point in his argument, Barthes declares that a referent without “signifié” (or meaning to put it simply) in a narrative structure can only provide a *referential illusion*, because “at the very moment when these details are supposed to denote the reality directly, all that they do, tacitly, is signify it” (16).

In a recent essay examining modern fiction, the neo-Marxist critic and philosopher, Jacques Rancière, objects to Barthes's ideas concerning the function of insignificant details in modernist prose (what Rancière understands in a broad sense of the term, including the nineteenth-century realism). Rancière argues that the examples chosen from Flaubert's novels (in particular the barometer of *Un coeur simple* which, for Barthes, does not possess any social or psychological connotation that demands to be integrated into the narrative as a meaningful totality) are not insignificant at all, are not self-referent, "empty" markers of the verisimilitude, freed from the burden of representing an extra-textual reality. On the contrary, according to Rancière the abundance of the "insignificant" details in the realist novel bear witness to a cultural-political and—first and foremost—sensual emancipation of subaltern population (Rancière, *Le fil* 25–26). Instead of being vehicles of a *reality effect*, "insignificant" details are rather markers of an *equality effect* in that they express "the discovery of an original ability of working-class men and women to get access to forms of experiences they were excluded from until this moment" (Rancière, *Le fil* 20).<sup>2</sup> According to Rancière, excess description is also opposed to the semiotic structure of the narrative as a whole, yet in his interpretation the intrusion of multitudinous details in the novel becomes a sign of the democratization of fiction enacted due to a "redistribution of the forms of the sensible experience" (30).

Rancière's analysis amply demonstrates how relative it is to qualify any detail as "insignificant" in a literary work while simultaneously underscoring the limits to a semiotic conception of the narrative which remains detached from the historic-social context of a work's production or reception. Rancière criticizes Barthes for missing the real political stakes involved in description: "[I]dentify modern literature and its political impact with a purification of the narrative structure, by sweeping out the parasitic images of the real" (30). Yet at this juncture, Rancière reduces Barthes's position mainly to the critical approach of "unmasking" the false nature expressed in his essays of the *Mythologies* and those discussing Brechtian theater in the 1950s. While we can partly attribute this credo regarding the political and critical power of the intellectual work to his analysis of Robbe-Grillet's descriptions, Barthes's position became less articulated on the matter during his structuralist (and post-structuralist) years. Similar to other Barthes texts dating from the late 1960s (such as *The Death of Author*, "From Work

<sup>2</sup> "[L]a découverte d'une capacité inédite des hommes et des femmes du peuple à accéder à des formes d'expérience qui leur étaient jusque-là refusées."

to Text,” *S/Z*), *The Reality Effect* advocates the autonomy of a textual realm and the liberation of the literary text from all forms of a representative task; the text-reality relationship deployed therein radically inverts the mimetic conception of the literary text according to which textual representations are supposed to be subordinate to an *a priori*, given reality. This liberation of textual signifiers outlines a rather indirect and utopian political program, in which the critique of a bourgeois, capitalist social order’s cultural domination carries less of an emphasis, but still emerges in the critique of reading as consumption as well as in Barthes’s rejection of the notion of author and that of the work of art as a bourgeois institutions of intellectual property, limiting the freedom of interpretation. While admittedly in a way that is quite different compared to Rancière’s, Barthes’s critique is also oriented against the concept of narrative as an organized totality; it rather aims the literature and the language in their generality as systems of representation. Barthes claims not only that the textual representations are not homologous or analogous with an extra-textual reality and governed by their own logic and laws, but also suggests—with an epistemological audacity—that the very concept of “reality” is constructed as a linguistic “mirage” in which descriptions of concrete details function as “unreality effects,” and consequently as operators for the autonomy of textual signifiers. Obviously such a critical position could not easily be transformed into a political reading tool; the next stages in Barthes’s career bear witness to a personal turn during which the issue of the insignificant detail, the *having-been-there* of represented objects and humans, evolves into a melancholic investigation of themes connected to mortality and death.

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## Stopnja ničte pisave in učinek nerealnosti: Roland Barthes o opisu

Ključne besede: naratologija / pripovedna struktura / opis / nepomembne podrobnosti / ideološka kritika / učinek realnosti / kulturna semiotika / Barthes, Roland

Roland Barthes v svojem delu večkrat spregovori o opisu v kontekstu, za katerega se zdi, da je povezan z enako pogosto tematiko, namreč z upiranjem pomenu. Barthes je raziskoval funkcijo opisa v sklopu dveh večjih raziskovalnih področij: fikcijske pripovedi in vizualnih znakov. Da bi izsledil Barthesove teoretsko različne razlage, ki zadevajo funkcijo opisa in prisotnost nepomembnih detajlov v pripovednem besedilu, se v svojem besedilu osredotočam na prvo področje. Najprej analiziram, kako je Barthes v kritičnih razpravah, ki so se v 50. letih 20. stoletja odvijale v zvezi s francoskim *nouveau romanom*, opisu in odvečnim podrobnostim pripisoval ideološko-kritično funkcijo. Zatem se posvetim novi poziciji, ki jo je zavzel opis v Barthesovi strukturalni teoriji naracije. V zadnjem delu prispevka proučujem pojem učinka realnosti, natančneje način, na katerega Barthes preobrazi in redefinira funkcijo navidezno nepomembnih pripovednih detajlov kot sredstva za doseganje avtonomnosti besedilnih označevalcev.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 82.0-3Barthes R.