Why Should Geographers Lost In The Field Read Roland Barthes?

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to propose a comparison that will enlighten the things that occur between geographers and their fields. By operating a transfer between text and field on the one hand, and fieldwork and criticism on the other, I want to claim that some tools emanating from literary criticism can be used by geographers to construct their field as a reflexive object and to analyze the conditions of the production of geographical knowledge. My demonstration is based on the "Nouvelle critique" – *i.e.* the French structuralist criticism of the 1970s – and especially on Roland Barthes's famous article summing up his conception of text, entitled "Texte (theorie du)" (1975). The first part of the article focuses on Barthes's theory of text, while the second part proposes a comparison between geographers' fields and text.

Key Words: field, fieldwork, text, literary criticism, Roland Barthes

In this article, I want to assume that reading Roland Barthes (1915-1980) can be useful for geographers lost in the field. This idea seems provocative insofar as it contains two paradoxes that need to be elucidated:

First, what does it mean to be lost in the field? It is no use asking Barthes for help in finding a shortcut or the way to the closest person to interview. Even though Barthes has revealed the stereotypes conveyed by the *Guides bleus* (Barthes, 1957) – the famous elitist French travel guides – his works cannot equal in usefulness the *Hitchhikers guides* or the old *Baedeckers*. By *lost*, I mean the loss of all of one's reference points: Sofia Coppola (2004) reminds us that travelers can be "lost in translation" and the *Geographical Review* special issue entitled "Doing Fieldwork" (Delyser and Starrs, 2001) puts emphasis on this loss of all references which appears to be at the heart of the activity of fieldwork. As a matter of fact, geographers have followed the post-modern turn and geographical fieldwork is now a topic of analysis, thanks to various major contributions such as the 1994 *Professional Geographers* special issue dedicated to feminist fieldwork (*Professional Geographers*, 1994) or Felix Driver's (2000) injunction to focus on it. The complex relations between geographers and their fields appear now as a main element to focus on (Volvey, 2003). This loss of all points of reference is synonymous with the geographers' task: it is a good way to question this topic of fieldwork from the point of view of the subject. Indeed, Denis Cosgrove (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1989) invites us to focus on the fieldworking epistemic subject. Geographers have taken up these ideas and have now turned their attention to the importance of individuals in the construction of knowledge (Conference "Mapping Fieldwork", 2008).

Second, I have to explain the provocative idea that reading Barthes could be useful to our understanding of what really happens in the field between the subjects (*i.e.* the geographers) and their objects (*i.e.* the field). In fact, I propose that theoretical approaches defined by Barthes in his critical works could help geographers to avoid being fooled by the various biases they have to cope with in their fields.

Who was the Roland Barthes I am currently dealing with? He was one of the leading lights of the French intellectual context of the 1950s to 1970s. His work is emblematic of the rise of the structuralist paradigm and then its subsequent calling into question (Dosse, 1991; Dosse, 1992). This article does not aim to be yet another tribute celebrating the publication, fifty years ago, of Barthes's (1957) very famous *Mythologies*. In France, this anniversary was the occasion to rediscover a major author and to re-edit his main works. The present article invites us, using semiology and psychoanalysis, to define *field* and *fieldwork* as reflexive objects of geography.

As a matter of fact, it could seem paradoxical for geographer to even read, let alone apply Roland Barthes. Indeed, Barthes mainly deals with semiology and literary criticism and has no interest whatsoever in geography. Moreover, geographers and especially French geographers have long kept structuralism at a distance, which seems quite amazing, considering that France was the cradle of this

paradigm. There are some notable exceptions however, Roger Brunet's *chorèmes* can pertain to the structuralist project, but his intellectual itinerary reveals that he was more influenced by Horkheimer and Henri Lefebvre (Brunet, 1997): his proposal about spatial laws stems mainly from Marxism and not from the structuralist principles defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1949). Few geographers have analyzed the links between structuralism and geography (Desmarais and Ritchot, 2000) and they failed to convince other geographers to adopt a similar path. This absence of geographers can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, during the 1950s and 1960s, the classical paradigm inherited from Vidal de La Blache and consisting in two keywords: *milieu* and *society* (Buttimer, 1971) ceased to be efficient in explaining the evolution of societies. On the other hand, geographers held a peripheral and "subjugated" position inside the French academic institution (Bourdieu, 1984).

The aim of this paper is not to ask why geographers have missed taking the structuralist turn – even if some of them have proposed applying these concepts to geography –, but to take into account some of the tools (such as *text*) that structuralist criticism promoted. Assuming that Barthes can help geographers practice fieldwork is just a pretext for reconceptualising field, fieldwork and their epistemological stakes. The question I want to focus on is: does field equal text? Does fieldworking equal reading? These questions invite us first to wonder whether it is accurate to transfer concepts and methods from literary criticism (and especially structuralist criticism) to geography, then to test the heuristic qualities of this metaphor between text and field.

Barthes's theory of text: a relevant tool to reconceptualise the process of meaning

In his autobiography, which he composed as if his life were a text, Roland Barthes (1975a) defines himself as a *semiologist*, *i.e.* a specialist of signs. He promoted semiology as a new science: whereas the founders (Saussure, 1916) of linguistics considered the *sign* a component of languages (hence, semiology as part of linguistics). Roland Barthes promoted the autonomy of signs and semiology. For him, languages are just one component of a global system of signs which he tried to reveal (Barthes, 1967). Everything is made up of signs (Barthes, 1977). Hence, his work was to decipher signs, as if the whole world (both concrete and immaterial) was a text. This is the method he applies to criticize texts, and that is why he is considered one of the most famous critics of the structuralist period. He influenced numerous thinkers and writers all over the world. Pitting himself against the conservative Sorbonne (the main academic authority in pre-1968 France), he promoted a new method of textual criticism called at that time *Nouvelle critique* and directly inspired by structuralism. This new method focuses only on "text" without any references to the authors or their lives. Barthes elaborated a comprehensive theory which was first published in a famous article entitled "Texte

(theorie du)" for the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, one of the most widely-read and prestigious French encyclopedias (Barthes, 1975b).

Until Barthes, academics were accustomed to analyze texts by examining only the personal dimension of texts. The French positivist Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893) for example, who inspired a whole generation of critics, focused on the contextual study of a work of art, mainly basing his analysis on the triptych "race, milieu and moment". In contrast, structuralists focused solely on "text" and no longer based their criticism on the author's sociology or psychology. This was a major turn in literary studies which was deeply influenced by semiology and psychoanalysis. The controversy on Racine's theater which opposed Raymond Picard (a renowned Sorbonne professor and critic) and Roland Barthes (who was, at the time of the controversy, an academic misfit) typifies the difference between these two methods and the intellectual gap that separates them (Barthes, 1963; Barthes, 1966; Picard, 1965): whereas Picard enlightens Racine's plays' historical background, Barthes mainly focuses on the text he explores thanks to linguistic and psychoanalytic tools.

At the heart of this the barthesian heuristic project lies the *text* which is henceforth promoted as the new central object that critics have to focus on. Indeed, Barthes begins by pointing out a main difference between *book* and *text* - "you can hold a book, but you cannot hold a text"[2] - insofar as a text is made only of words whereas a book is an object made of paper and ink. He goes on: "Text deals with nothing but language". *Text* is defined as an extract of a book, strictly delimited by critics in order to answer their linguistic and poetic questions. The delimitations of texts are thus exclusively guided by heuristic processes. For Barthes, text is an "epistemic field": texts are mainly analyzed to experience an idea of what language is (or should be) and to answer some questions related to language and poetic theory.

Barthes points out another relevant opposition between the author and the reader (with this in perspective, critics appear as ideal readers) both author and reader have a role in the interpretation of texts. Authors write books and critics delimit texts. Hence, the text is co-produced both by its author and the various readers who successively read it. Still, the meaning of the text is independent of the author and the reader. It is never definitively fixed and one must prefer a *process of meaning*[3] that is always in progress: "Text keeps perpetually being *at work"*: that is why some very old texts such as Greek tragedies for instance can be still considered as current even if their authors lived twenty-five centuries ago. This hypothesis of co-production of texts by author and reader explains why a text can

[2] All translations from French to English are mine.
[3] The expression *process of meaning* is used to define the fact to assign a specific meaning to a text. It is the aim assigned by Barthes to the reading.

cover a great diversity of meanings that critics have to explore, according to their own personal and theoretical idiosyncrasies. Thus, literary criticism appears as a hermeneutic whose aim consists in exploring the various meanings that texts keep delivering.

Consequently, the process of meaning – which occurs when reading – is the main operation to be explained insofar as it determines the way readers could receive and consequently interpret texts. It involves two aspects, which are closely linked. First, Barthes reminds us of the importance of *intertextuality*, which refers to the complex relationships, such as quotation, reference, rewriting, *etc,* that exist between various texts (Genette, 1982). According to Barthes, texts are composed of numerous other texts, both older texts that pre-exist it, or paradoxically, even more recent texts (Bayard, 2008) that authors have in their minds while writing and/or that ring a bell with readers. The importance of intertextuality in structuralist criticism leads to a psychoanalytic level of interpretation motivated by the "pleasure of reading" (Barthes, 1973). This pleasure stems from the ability of readers to recognize borrowings or quotations from books they have previously read. This notion of pleasure opens up the path toward research involving psychoanalysis, as some structuralist critics have done (Kristeva, 1969).

From my perspective, the main contribution of this theory is to focus on the process of meaning, which highlights the diversity of significations engendered by the complexity of the sign system involved in the reading process that a text can reveal. Umberto Eco went further into these questions and claimed that the reader has the most important role in attaining global comprehension of texts (Eco, 1979). It is no longer any use to be exhaustive while analyzing a text. Critics now have to clarify their own intellectual and theoretical positions, according to their academic purpose.

Is field a text?

But in what way can Roland Barthes be useful for geographers? They have to deal with different kinds of sources, such as textual materials (books, newspapers, archives, statistics, etc.), oral materials (interviews, etc.) and fieldwork materials (observations, photos, feelings, etc.). Roland Barthes taught us that everything is made up of signs and that reading these signs as if they were texts is the only way to decipher them and to give them meaning. Geographers, wherever they are (in the library or even in the field) and whatever they do, work upon *texts* and nothing but *texts*. Moreover, Trevor Barnes and James Duncan (1992) and Bernard Debarbieux (1995) have suggested the notion that *space* is nothing more than a metaphor for *text*. Along the same line, I want to assume and discuss the fact that Roland Barthes helps geographers conceive *field* (both concrete and abstract) as a text too. This proposal enables us to apply his theory of text to the field and fieldwork because even if the methods and topics of critics and social scientists are very different, they both have to give meaning to the objects they are attempting to analyze. I

would like to go further by assuming that the way geographers should conceive field and fieldwork is very similar to the way Barthes defines text and reading. The object of the second part of my paper is thus to propose a comparison of field (*i.e.* the place which is studied by geographers) and text, of fieldwork (the operation of collecting data) and reading.

The difference between *space* and *place* which geographers have been accustomed to pointing out (Massey, 2005) is very similar to the difference between *book* and *text* that Barthes has clarified: geographers do not analyze books/space but located spaces – territories/texts for instance – which they define and delimit. To study these territories, they always focus on specific *places* they choose to investigate deeply – or "thickly", to adopt a malinowskian vocabulary (Malinowski, 1922) – and that they have to delimit carefully according to their heuristic purposes and their methods. This specific place, which is delimited solely for the purpose of collecting data is called the *field*. Just like *text*, the *field* – this located place which must be analyzed – appears as an "epistemic field", *i.e.* a laboratory to experiment with methodological approaches and conceptual tools in order to validate – or not –hypotheses. For geographers, facts that they observe have a huge diversity of meaning depending on methods and the hypotheses geographers use to analyze them. So, field exists insofar as geographers use tools and methodology to analyze it: this is very similar to the text which is the part of a book delimited by using scientific tools to solve linguistic and hermeneutic questions.

The meanings of the field that geographers are looking for are co-produced by both the author (*i.e.* the social group which occupies a given place) and the reader (*i.e.* the individual geographer who studies it). According to Barthes's theory of text, a singular text can have plural meanings which depend on the various readings of that text by readers from different perspectives. Similarly, geographical place can be variously interpreted as a function of the intellectual background of geographers. Like text, there are various meanings of a singular field. The unending nature of the process of meaning allows geographers to conduct fieldwork in the same place and to propose different interpretations and analyses stemming from their various objects and methods. Even if geographers study the very same place, all their fields are different insofar as they consider them from various points of view with different conceptual and technical tools. It is no longer of any use to try to attain closure in interpreting the field: the emphasis is now put on the ability of geographers to compare their fields and to adapt their methods to them. Whereas the aim of pre-modern geography was to collect and order various data in order to draw an exhaustive description of the world (Glacken, 1973), contemporary geographers are accustomed to resolving general questions through the fields in which they work. The comparison of these fields becomes as a main element of increasing knowledge.

This specificity of geography and social science is very close to the intertextuality Barthes deals with. For him, in order to attribute meaning to a text, readers are constantly creating relationships between what they are currently reading and all that they have ever read. Hence, methodologies or hypothesis can be transferred from one field to another. This ability to transfer transforms the fieldwork activity: the field is no longer a place where one extracts data, but almost a place where one produces meaning. Like texts, fields keep on "being at work".

This intertextuality which is at work in the field appears as the main factor of the pleasure that all geographers feel while fieldworking (Delysser and Starrs, 2001). This *pleasure* is a deeply entrenched tradition in the lore of geographers according to Anne Volvey (2004) who suggests using psychoanalytic tools to address the issue of geographers pleasure in the field. She also explores the epistemic subject of geographers in the field and focuses on the interactions between geographers and their fields while geographical knowledge is produced. My objective is indeed very similar: I want to clarify what happens in the field between geographers and their fields and to understand the complex relationships between subjects (*i.e.* epistemic subjects) and their objects. My proposal aims to go further into these questions thanks to tools borrowed from literary criticism. Why, in other words, is it useful for geographers to borrow from Roland Barthes and decipher the signs they have to cope with?

Some geographers such as James Duncan and Nancy Duncan (1992) have even mentioned Roland Barthes in their research on landscape. I am not using Barthes to conceptualize an object, but using the tools he proposes to examine the way geographers analyze and investigate their objects. This approach allows geographers to pay attention not only to the clues that could help them understand the meanings of a particular place, but also to consider that their own feelings as signs for exploring their field. Roland Barthes (1973) explains that readers cannot be unconcerned about the book they are reading: just as readers *belong* to the book they read, geographers are deeply involved in the various dimensions of their field. Indeed, geographers must be conscious of the biases that occur while collecting data, but they also have to be aware of the impact of their own presence in the field and to take into account the pleasure – or displeasure – of doing fieldwork.

This taking into account of pleasure leads us to focus on the engagement of geographers in their field. Scientists – and especially *social* scientists – cannot avoid experiencing their co-presence with people they are studying. They cannot avoid wondering what the purpose – and the consequences – are of the research they practice. On the one hand, it raises the issue of the political and ethical responsibilities of geographers, as Yves Lacoste (1976) first suggested during the 1970's. But on the other hand, it puts the stress on the psychological context of fieldwork which is crucial to understanding how geographical knowledge is produced. Barthes's theory of text puts an end to the positivist ideas according to

which the social world is not an intellectual construction but a given. Reading Roland Barthes authorizes geographers to consider themselves as epistemic subjects, which allows them to narrate their own journeys in the papers they write, but also to mention their own personal feelings – such as pleasure or fear, depending on the situation and the sensibility of researchers – which are part of the meaning process, even if papers tend to be written in a neutral way. Indeed, the explanation of feelings clarifies the way geographers approach a social group: the way the fieldwork is achieved is partly the result of the research itself. Geographers catch up with anthropologists and with their writing procedures: to achieve a global understanding of a group they cannot avoid explaining the relations they have with the group they are embedded in (*i.e.* Brody, 1981). This technique stressed the feelings and impressions of geographers and the acts they perform in the field. These scientific gestures are often studied in a methodological way, according to a *realistic* conception of science (Latour and Woolgar, 1979), but Roland Barthes prompts geographers to consider their gestures not only through a methodological dimension but also as a means to reveal the ways in which they themselves are part of their field. It leads them to consider their own practices as signs to be interpreted in the process of meaning.

A barthesian way of collecting data in the field?

In the first section of this paper, I explained how geographers are accustomed to using Roland Barthes's works and theory to develop their own objects and theories. In the following section, I conceptualized both field and fieldworking through Barthes theory of text. Now, we might want to turn to the question of how to conceive a barthesian way of fieldworking. This is indeed a crucial issue that invites us to explore the hands-on training and advice that is given to geographers to carry out fieldwork. Responding to geographers search for advice on how explore their field publishers have produced a huge variety of handbooks (such as Frew, 1999; Holmes and Farbrother, 2000). At this point of my explanation – after having theorized field, fieldwork and fieldworking thanks to Barthes – I am sure some readers are expecting me to give some ideas of what a barthesian way of fieldworking could be. I am sorry to disappoint them as I have no idea of how Roland Barthes would do fieldwork if he were a geographer. Of course, I could *imagine* some practices inspired by his theory. Even if geographers do not directly acknowledge the debt to Roland Barthes in their empirical practice, they are already in fact accustomed to following his path through the way they pay attention to very prosaic things or the way they consider every fact as a text to explore (Duncan and Duncan, 1992). Thus, even if they do not define their own practices as barthesian, most geographers are in the habit of applying the methods he promoted to explain texts. This explains the various ways geographers are accustomed to conceptualizing their fieldwork practices: even if they keep wondering whether their gestures are appropriate for collecting accurate data, the methodological frame is often theorized after they come back from the field. Indeed, social scientists keep

re-constructing their own practices and methodologies after they have finished their fieldwork, at the same time as they theorize their objects.

The above invites us to examine what really happens for geographers in the field, and to not focus on what geographers tell us about their own real practices (Latour and Woolgar, 1979). Michel de Certeau's concept of "every day life" as *tactics* and *strategies* is relevant to explore this gap between what scientists say and what they really do, between theoretical and empirical fieldwork and the subsequent theorization scientists engage in (De Certeau, 1980). In fact, methodologies determine *strategies* for scientists to organize their own work, but when it comes to the field, geographers develop *tactics* that respect both what methodology orders them to do and what *reality* allows them to do.

Conclusion

The use of literary devices is a way to take into account in a profound manner the psychological dimension of doing fieldwork. Moreover, it is the way to reconnect with the origins of geography and its etymology. Indeed, *geo-graphy* is deeply linked with text. The task of geographers is to describe the whole world (*geo*) using their own words *(graphy*). By claiming that field is a text, I have shown that geographers and critics should share some of their methods and consider *field* as a place of total creativity, both conceptual and methodological: places that geographers study are nothing else but epistemic fields. Last, I would like to underline that the objective of this approach is to achieve greater understanding of the fieldwork process.

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