

Q&A 16 comments summary

MARK: Thank you for this, Ron! I actually picked up a copy of Barthes' Mythologies after that last Q&A post and have started working my way through — I haven't read him since undergrad. I will add the rest of your recommendations to my list, and any excuse to revisit Comics Madness is cool with me.

- Me: I'm wondering whether I dare bring it around to role-playing, which is where Sean started with it last month. Maybe better to let some scholar-slash-popularizer get to it a couple of decades from now.

DAVID: Thanks for this Ron. I have been on my own long journey to re-evaluate the dungeon crawl after many years of the non-situational dungeon. The last mile for me is prepping and doing it. I haven't been enthusiastic about this last mile. I think between Situation & Story, the Tunnels & Trolls prep you made available, and many of the terms you used in this video, I am finally able to get excited about this prospect.

- Me: At the risk of saying anything besides enthusiasm, I think it's important to recognize "dungeon," the literal object/place, for what it is: also pure artifact. There is absolutely nothing that this particular detail of location provides which is special for play, of itself.
- David: Yup, I think I was mentally blocked and it is clear that now that this is not a special case.

JC: Barthes' essay in pro-wrestling is awesome. I've always considered Mythology, Sword & Sorcery, superheroes (pre-1980-ish) and Pro Wrestling to be all part of the Heroic Myth (out of all these, Pro-Wrestling, to me, is the most naked and true). There is a good video essay that uses a single pro-wrestling match to illustrate aspects of Barthes essay. Content Warning: Lots of blood, and violence. <https://youtu.be/YiRLIJVnKww>

- Me: Myth as semiotics (material) or archetype (mystic)? Referencing Barthes implies the former, but when you say "I've always considered," do you mean strictly within that concept?
- JC: Myth in the semiotics way (I think), I don't quite buy the archetypes or at least it doesn't speak to me on an emotional level. As far as "considered" it is more I see a through-line or continuity between the old hero tales, sword & sorcery and pro-wrestling. It's something I intuited well before I even heard of Barthes. I got into all three around the same time as a kid. There is something there in the violent struggles and triumphs that continues to appeal to me then, and today.
- Me: I absolutely see those things as continuous as well. The Odyssey only makes sense to me as, straightforwardly, with no irony or smirk or analogous analysis at all, a sword-and-sorcery novel, full stop.
- David: I will have to re-read that Barthes essay and I will check out the video clip, so I might have more to add afterwards. But shooting from the hip, pro-wrestling does have this aspect of mythic battles playing our infinitely with infinite variation using a simplistic set of roles and a really strong cross-cultural visual language. That's why games like World Wide Wrestling and Kayfabe, while having a lot of merit in their own right, lose something when portraying that medium for me. They remove the mythic aspect, which before the cat was let out of the bag (ie: wrestling is "fake" or "staged"), really had strong believers. The Ox Baker Cleveland riot (as one example) showcases how strongly the audience believed in those "staged" stories.
- David: I re-read the essay and watched the video. What a powerful piece of writing, I wouldn't be surprised if I finish the whole book (Mythologies) this weekend. Wrestling was codified very early on, so through most of the history, Barthes would have had the same raw material (same set of symbols) to analyze. At points, he states that it doesn't matter if it is real or not -- and that a "fair fight could only lead to boxing or judo". Yes, for reference I can think of the Antonio Inoki vs Great Antonio shoot (real fight). You'd expect more from two legends, but it is a good example of what it looks like when the wrestlers stop performing. It's short and one-sided. I suppose it arguably does have the component of justice because Inoki puts his opponent down for being "unprofessional" but it lacks in other important ways. Yet I can't really dismiss the many decades of kayfabe (or an even more descriptive term: "keeping the strength of the job") and the great amount of effort and deception that was devoted to keeping the charade going. Even to the extent of having protocols to protect the heels (villains) once they'd provoked the audience to the level of violence -- as was talked about in one of the interviews I listened to about the Ox Baker Cleveland riot (I can provide links to everything I reference if anybody is interested). The background to that incident is that Ox Baker was promoted as having killed two men using his finisher move, the heart punch. In fact, one man (Ray

Gunkel) did die after a match with Ox. And another (Alberto Torres) died weeks after a match with Ox, and they rolled that coincidence into the myth. When the fans in Cleveland saw Ox storm into the ring and attack Ernie Ladd repeatedly with his finisher, they became outraged because (presumably) they thought Ox Baker was going to kill Ladd. So they rioted. Ox Baker was a hell of a performer. My first memory of him was watching him try to beat up Kurt Russell in *Escape from New York*. It left me wondering if Ox Baker knew he was in a movie and not just there to beat up a guy with a spiked baseball bat. It ultimately didn't matter in terms of it being commercially viable once kayfabe died, the industry adapted -- either by playing up the performance or by dialing up the violence (example: the match in the video essay JC linked). But when kayfabe was alive, there was a whole (differently arranged) spectrum of non-belief, suspension of disbelief, and true belief. I don't want to drag this any more off topic but I guess I am curious about how, if, and to what extent belief ties into this discussion of myths.

- JC: As far as wrestling ttrpgs go, I have to agree with David on the athleticism and performance of a match not being translated well to the tabletop. I think there is a far more fruitful area for play outside the ring, as the people within the Kayfabe-era of the 50s - 70s. Back then, a lot of promotions ran business within a geographically defined territory. This created a lot of colorful individuals, you'd possibly know or run into, in the place you live. Leave the "in-ring" work as an aspect rather than the core focus would help focus the game on the people living their lives during an era where the line between Kayfabe/Performance and Reality got blurry.
- David: Very well stated, that's a game I want to play!