MEDIA, MYTH
AND
TERRORISM

A DISCOURSE-MYTHOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS OF THE 'BLITZ SPIRIT' IN
BRITISH NEWSPAPER RESPONSES
TO THE JULY 7TH BOMBINGS

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For Bobby, Kira, Emily and Freya…

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1
Introduction: The Politics of Remembering and the Myth of the Blitz

Background, aims and objectives

This book is about terrorism and mythological storytelling in British newspapers. By analysing press responses to the 7 July bombings, it provides some insight into the ways that war and conflict are portrayed in past and present contexts. Throughout the theoretical and analytical ground covered in this book, I will explore the ideological nuances of mythological storytelling and the highly politicised processes of remembering and recontextualising the past. This book will investigate some of the discursive mechanisms that construct the past and present contexts of mythologies. In doing so, I propose and adopt a discourse-mythological approach (DMA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which I will return to in Chapter 2. This book is cross-disciplinary in its readership appeal and areas of academic interest, but it primarily serves two purposes: it shows how myth theory can be adopted in approaches to discourse studies, whilst showing mythologists how methodological approaches to discourse studies can enrich the scope and application of myth theory.

What happens when stories draw on popular but simplistic, historical accounts of a nation's past? When this happens, what alternative stories are suppressed and why would they otherwise provide equally important accounts of the past? What happens when inaccurate accounts are often preserved and reused to serve political and ideological interests in the present? This book will help to answer those questions by focusing on the historical and contemporary complexities behind a popular story (memory) of the Second World War: the myth of the Blitz. I will explain why this is referred to as a myth and how this myth recurred in contemporary storytelling that attempted to understand, explain and

respond to the 7 July bombings in 2005. The bombings saw the most costly, single attack on London since the Second World War. Carried out by four British citizens, suicide bombs on London's public transport system killed 56 people. In responses from the press, politicians and the public alike, the Second World War became a common analogy for understanding the level of devastation caused by the bombings.

As Ian McLaine points out: 'British civilian morale during the Second World War has subsequently assumed the quality of myth' (1979: 1). The Blitz myth is a story which 'encapsulates for its believers all the qualities they see themselves as possessing in circumstances of extreme adversity' (*ibid.*). Roland Manthorpe has more recently offered an account of this reliance on past events: 'Press, politicians and public looked to history, in particular, to the history of London's Blitz, in reacting to the fatal attacks on the capital's transport network' (Manthorpe, 2006). Manthorpe describes how 'the nation's historical imagination followed proud and explicit comparisons in British newspapers to the events of the Blitz and London's resilience against the threat of Nazi Germany' (*ibid.*). The myth of the Blitz has survived extensive questioning and challenges. The nation's identity has been 'formed, first and foremost, in the national memory. Memory is historical, of course, but, transient and partial, it is not history' (*ibid.*). Subsequently, in response to the London bombings, 'British men and women instinctively and unselfconsciously pulled the Blitz from their store of historical memories' (*ibid.*). It is this contemporary role of historical memory and discursive connections between past and present that I will examine in this book.

Many sources after the bombings referred to the attacks as an act of war. This provided some discursive context for popular memories of London in 1940 as the frame for interpreting and understanding the attacks. At the time, I was struck by what appeared to be an inaccurate parallel with the past; the circumstances that London faced in 2005 were drastically different from those of 1940. Notably, the perpetrators on 7 July were British citizens rather than a foreign threat or invasion. Nor was this a threat that equated to the military force of another country, like Nazi Germany. From historical accounts of 1940 that have revised popular myths of Britain's past – stiff-upper-lip stories of unity, universal calm, defiance, resilience and stoicism – historians have highlighted less popular memories of that time. Subsequently, it is clear that invocations of the 'Blitz spirit', which I will return to below, are problematic in both the past and present contexts. These versions of past events often suppress other stories that provide less flattering accounts of Britain in the cultural, class, religious, racial and behavioural frictions that have

occurred and recur within the tensions of contemporary society. For these reasons, it was the ideological role of Second World War mythology in storytelling after 7 July that aroused my interests in this research.

It is common for societies to draw upon historical accounts (constructions) of the nation whilst attempting to understand who they are in the present. But it is crucial that we understand these processes of remembering (and forgetting) as highly political social practices. The politics of remembering often involves simultaneous dynamics of forgetting (Kelsey, 2012a; Wodak, 2009a). These processes are influenced by the interests and objectives of those who are able to shape contextual accounts of the past:

> The way we deal with the past is part of 'Vergangenheitspolitik' (politics of dealing with the past): Different groups, political parties or politicians prefer different interpretations with a view to aligning their own positions (as advantageously as possible) with the official version of history. Hence, history written with hindsight and instilled with meaning like a 'narrative' must be invariably perceived as a construction. Historical context needs to be understood as the outcome of a social process whereby past events that are regarded as worthy vehicles for moral concepts are selected and made the objects of remembrance and commemoration. (Wodak, 2009b: 15)

Previous debates have shown that the dynamics of social, collective and individual memory are hugely complex phenomena (Garde-Hansen, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992; Pickering and Keightley, 2012). Other works in this area have also examined mythology in relation to the social dynamics of memory (Bell, 2003; Poole, 2008; Shahzad, 2011). Due to the cross-disciplinary context of my research, this book does not always draw on prevalent works in memory studies. However, it certainly holds a shared interest with these works and offers relevant insights to the field. Previous works on journalism and memory (Zelizer, 2008; Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014) reflect the significance of news media in mnemonic processes and the parallels that journalists draw between past and present events. Other works on journalistic storytelling (Bird and Dardenne, 1998; Kelsey, 2014a; Lule, 2001; O'Donnell, 2003) have demonstrated the relevance of myth theory in analyses of news media. As I have previously argued, 'journalists, politicians and the public are caught up in complex fields of cultural rituals … and social practices … which influence and are influenced by popular memory' (2012a: 24). Hence, this book offers DMA as a systematic analytical framework that

can be adopted to investigate discursive constructions and ideological operations of mythology in journalistic storytelling.

This book will draw attention to the ideological influences and assumptions of cultural identities and stories of who 'we' (the British) are as a nation. Regardless of any reader's political position, bias or allegiance, this book should enlighten him or her to the nuances and ideological contentions that occur in attempts to construct stories that are often told to serve political agendas and uphold social ideals. Even if readers disagree with some of my observations, analysis and conclusions, I hope a few things are clear and apparent from this research: the world is more complex than we are often led to believe; our 'common-sense' perceptions are not as objective or accurate as we might think; it is important to understand the social role of mythology in past and present contexts; and storytelling is often a manipulative process in which accounts of the past are adapted to serve ideological purposes in the present. But it is important to note one thing about my intentions here: this book is not about lies. At no point am I interested in accusing any party of lies or dishonesty. Whilst untruths exist in the world, especially in storytelling, they are not my primary concern in an examination of myth. In Christopher Flood's approach to political myth, to which I will return in Chapter 2, he states:

> Studies of myth almost invariably open with the caveat that the reader should not confuse the popular, pejorative usage of the term myth as a synonym for falsehood, distortion, or delusion with the scholarly usage which stresses that myths have unquestioned validity within the belief systems of the social groups which cherish them. (Flood, 2002)

As I will explain below, this analysis defines myth as a simplifying process that functions ideologically in the messages that it delivers and suppresses.

It is significant that this book cannot account for the vast ground that such a topic relates to across so many academic disciplines and sociological influences. This limitation demonstrates the importance of understanding the mechanisms of mythological storytelling and its ideological role in society due to the endless connections and relevance it has to our perceptions of issues and events that occur in the world in which we live. Memory studies, terrorism studies, journalism studies, cultural studies, media studies, historical studies, sociology, linguistics and discourse studies are just some of the academic disciplines that

might claim a central interest to the topic of this book. It is impossible for me to account for the vast theoretical, analytical and methodological landscapes across all of these disciplines. Therefore, I ask readers to appreciate that this book adopts one interdisciplinary framework that I have developed in my DMA model. DMA should offer readers a systematic and innovative framework, providing rigorous analysis that is relevant and insightful to disciplines that might stretch beyond the scope of this book.

As readers will also learn from the ground I cover, it is impossible to account for the vast contextual material and research existing around the sociological phenomena that this book concerns, in areas including but not limited to: race; class; gender; economics; history; politics; ideology; and power. These are among the endless topics that I touch upon, but cannot do justice within the scope of this analysis. So, above all else, I hope to provide suggestions and motivations that mobilise further thoughts on the topics to which this analysis relates. I hope readers can adopt, adapt, refine and, if necessary, critique my approach to DMA that I simply offer as an analytical toolkit. Like any toolkit, it might include new tools over time, it might be used for different jobs and purposes, and it might wear out or need updating. Either way, DMA offers a nuanced approach to understanding discourse, mythology and the ideological role of storytelling in society. Chapter 2 will explain the theoretical and methodological aspects of DMA before the following chapters explore the discursive complexities of British newspaper stories for a month after the bombings. This should provoke readers into further, critical reflection of cross-generational storytelling – not only on this topic but also on other topics concerning memory and mythology within and beyond journalism. But before we go any further, let's clarify exactly what I mean by mythology and the theoretical approach that is adopted for this book.

This book's approach to mythology

Myth provides a particular way of representing and understanding the world. Whilst it promotes one way of seeing or discussing something, it restricts and denies other interpretations or understandings. As Jack Lule explains: 'Myth upholds some beliefs but degrades others. It celebrates but also excoriates. It affirms but it also denies' (2001: 119). Myth distorts meaning and often suppresses complexity. Meanings created by myth are formed via associations with other concepts or ideas that appear to be connected in some way, justifying and naturalising the way

in which something is defined. Barthes once referred to the 'naturalness with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history' (1972: 11). It is this impression of a natural (rather than a cultural or historical) connection between one thing and another set of ideas that characterises Barthes' approach to myth. For Barthes, myths are culturally constructed through semiotic systems (signs) that hold denotative and connotative meanings. Meanings formed as myths appear to exist naturally even though they occur culturally. As Barthes explains, 'mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things' (1993: 110). For example, a picture of a rose is, denotatively, a rose. But on a connotative level, the rose would be associated with other meanings, such as passion or romance (see also Branston and Stafford, 1999). The only thing that exists prior to any subsequent association or meaning is the object (the rose) itself. So, identifying myth offers a way of deconstructing and questioning the cultural meanings and representations that shape understandings of the world.

If meaning can only be constructed culturally, then it is important that some consideration is given to the social contexts and processes of representation; considering who is speaking, what they are saying (or not saying) and the purpose that meanings serve. For example, the attachment of a dominant set of ideas around public responses to terrorism privileges a particular voice (or voices) and perspective (or perspectives) over others. Whilst mythological storytelling might not construct lies or untruths, it can be highly distorting due to the preferences, exaggerations, suppressions or simplifications that function through it. As Lule explains: 'Myth legitimises and justifies positions. Myth celebrates dominant beliefs and values. Myth degrades and demeans other beliefs that do not align with those of the storyteller' (2001: 184). It is the ideological role of myth that needs to be addressed when considering why it matters and why it should come under scrutiny.

According to Barthes, the role of myth legitimises the meaning of things in a way that transcends any grounds for debate or questioning. Myth provides clarity in meanings because it 'purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact' (quoted in Calder, 1991: 3). In a historical context, myth can overlook the complexity of events. Then, by relying on 'what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is … without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful

clarity' (*ibid*.). It is at this point of clarity that 'things appear to mean something by themselves' (*ibid*.) and are detached from speculation or doubt. Myths are constantly clarifying, distorting and naturalising meanings, often at the cost of depth and complexity. In demonstrating the way in which myth works, Barthes analysed the front cover of a *Paris Match* magazine. The image is of a black soldier in a French uniform saluting what is assumed to be the French flag. Barthes claims that the meaning of this picture delivers a particular set of messages:

> France is a great Empire ... all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and ... there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (1993: 115)

Barthes argued that the soldier is deprived of history, thus becoming a form of gestures. History becomes a deprived part of the meaning, whilst the meaning itself remains full due to the message that it delivers. The meaning and message that Barthes identifies in the *Paris Match* picture has simplified and suppressed the historical complexities and politics of French colonialism.

As Duncan Bell argues, 'Myth serves to flatten the complexity, the nuance, the performative of human history; it presents instead a simplistic and often uni-vocal story' (2003: 75). The very principle of myth is to transform history into nature. Jack Lule refers to myth as 'a societal story that expresses prevailing ideals, ideologies, values and beliefs. More broadly myth is an essential social narrative ... and forms to offer exemplary models for social life' (cited in Rodgers, 2003: 200). Nonetheless, 'reading through' myth does not necessarily hinder its influence. Barthes argues that the detail of a newspaper article may proceed beyond the myth and address some elements of complexity that do not support the immediate impression that the article has initially (and dominantly) portrayed, supported and implemented. In fact, we will see many instances of this happening throughout the analysis chapters. But Barthes argues that even when this does happen, myth has already caused an 'immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it' (1993: 130).

The key function of myth is the construction or deliverance of a concept, sign or archetype that appears as common sense. This is why myth can be 'experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are

hidden … but because they are naturalised' (*ibid*.: 131). Barthes sums up this naturalising process as follows:

> In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abol-ishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (*Ibid*.: 143)

This 'blissful clarity' that Barthes describes is often constructed through binary forms of meaning and understanding mechanisms of representa-tion. Binary oppositions contribute to constructions of spectacle, which provide an efficient format for portraying particular meanings. In terms of understanding conflict, Barthes' approach to the spectacle of excess and morality provides a further insight to the dimensions of myth that I explore in this book.

Morality in myth provides a persuasive dynamic that we often see in storytelling. Moral storytelling reflects the conventions of commonly accepted cultural ideals, values and archetypes. Barthes used an analysis of wrestling (as dramatic performance) to explore the role of excess in a model of suffering and justice that reflects moral values in society; a wrestler is expected to experience suffering in the process of gaining a higher moral position that provides him with a right to revenge and restore justice. For Barthes, this justice confirms a moral victory of good over evil. The body of the wrestler is a definitive feature of the spectacle ahead; their costumes, gestures and attitudes act as signs that indicate the role they will play in the theatrics of morality (*ibid*.: 17). It is in this process of spectacle and its display of actions through physique that Barthes sees wrestling entering a similar realm to that of the theatre: 'What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theatre' (*ibid*.: 18). According to Barthes, there is a 'moral mechanism' which func-tions theatrically to suit the audience's needs (*ibid*.: 19).

It is in this moral appeal that wrestling holds its authority. Key to this form of myth, in the moral actions that it pursues, is retaliation and the defeat of a legitimate enemy. As Barthes explains: 'What is … displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat and Justice' (*ibid*.: 19). It is the process of suffering that triggers an amplified representation of morality: 'The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is

reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering' (*ibid*.). Barthes stresses the importance of recognising the moral intentions of the wrestling spectacle and its relevance in a mythological sense. He explains that 'what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a moral concept: that of justice' (*ibid*.: 21). The notion of revenge is significant to the punishment and justice that prevails:

> The baser the action of the 'bastard', the more delighted the public is by the blow which he justly receives in return. If the villain – who is of course a coward – takes refuge behind the ropes, claiming unfairly to have a right to do so by a brazen mimicry, he is inexorably pursued there and caught, and the crowd is jubilant at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment … Naturally it is the pattern of Justice which matters here, much more than its content: wrestling is above all a quantitative sequence of compensations (an eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth). (*Ibid*.: 21–22)

The crowds participate in this spectacle in their calls to 'Give it to him' and 'Make him pay'. As we know from our own experiences, this model of retaliation and justice (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth) is common in cultural attitudes and responses to events of wrongdoing or when perceptions of injustice are concerned. These moral mechanisms are often socially ingrained in conceptual understandings of justice. This applies to our individual and collective moral codes and conventions that are often played out and expressed via the media, but run through sections of society as a whole. This is not to say that we all hold the same values: as this book will show, acts of violence mobilise multiple responses from different personal and ideological positions since we can all critically reflect and object to cultural values and conventions in our own ways. Barthes' model is just one useful way of understanding the mechanisms of moral storytelling. As I have previously argued in my DMA of media stories about bankers during the financial crisis, 'moral storytelling draws on numerous archetypal conventions beyond Barthes' model alone' (2014a: np).

   This book views journalism as one of many systems of storytelling (or mythmaking) that reflects archetypal conventions of mythology in diachronic and synchronic contexts. By following the caution of Flood's nuanced approach to myth, I do not make overt assumptions or assertions about 'the intentions of those who tell myths or judge the state of mind of those who appear to believe them' (Flood, 2002). However, I do believe that 'plausible inferences can be drawn from contemporary