Vernacular Mythologies: Instagram, Starbucks and Meaning-Making by Non-Elites at Paris Orly Airport

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ABSTRACT
In the 1950s, the French philosopher, critic, and semiotician Roland Barthes wrote a series of texts, published subsequently as the collection Mythologies (1957), that constitute a dissection of French popular culture of the time. Barthes used theories embraced in linguistics, and his approach has been replicated over the years, but here I argue that the participatory web, and in particular social network services, offers us a perspective to rethink mythmaking by non-elites, thanks to the networked language and semiotic practices of Instagram users. In other words, and by invoking the Ancient Greek understanding of mythologies as the telling of stories, I look at how so-called ordinary citizens create a new set of myths by analysing the discursive presentations of a range of ‘things’ that individuals draw on at Paris Orly Airport. I explore how these ‘things’, and in particular Starbucks coffee, are explicitly made to carry meaning, according to the captions, hashtags, and emojis given by the original poster.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1954 and 1956, the French philosopher, critic, and semiotician Roland Barthes wrote a series of witty texts that were published subsequently as the collection Mythologies (1957). These texts are a dissection of popular culture from 1950s France, and constitute myths as Barthes views them, namely as a ‘language’. The artefacts discussed range from foodstuffs, sporting activities (such as the Tour de France) to literature, and the Citroën DS, and Barthes’ approach has been repeated, notably by Garcin (2007) fifty years after the publication of the original Mythologies. Garcin’s collection includes nominations from French writers and thinkers who discuss, inter alia, low-cost airlines, text messages, and sushi. Most recently, on BBC Radio 4 in 2014, Conrad (2014)—like Barthes before him—arbitrarily identified topics perceived as novelties of the day and described them as myths including screw-top wine bottles, the e-cigarette, and celebrity pets. Barthes, Garcin with his collaborators, and Conrad could all be described as public intellectuals, with privileged access to platforms through which they can disseminate widely their overviews of things that make meaning in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I argue here that the participatory web and, in particular, social network services (SNS) – thanks to the networked language and semiotic practices of subscribers to a wide range of social networks – provide us with a perspective from which to rethink mythmaking by non-elites, and to embrace digitalization processes that are disrupting research traditions at the same time as they are transforming society.

This article appears in the launch issue of the Digital Modern Languages section of the Modern Languages Open platform at a point where interest in the digital in French Studies in particular, and in Modern Languages more widely, has yet to electrify our disciplines. The digital turn, heralded in the last decades of the twentieth century, has unsettled scholarship in the arts and humanities but there is still not an abundance of evidence to suggest that, beyond pockets of research activity and pedagogical developments, Modern Languages has embraced the ways in which engagement with digital questions impacts on our objects of study as well as how we approach them. There are, of course, research programmes that interrogate the transformations initiated by new technologies, and pedagogical developments that engage with the changing shape of learning—but these advances, even when intensified during the first COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, can be best defined as a start rather than the systematic embedding of digital practices in Modern Languages. A quick glance at the list in French Studies Bulletin of the more than 80 PhDs awarded in the UK and Ireland over the past five years shows that only one refers to ‘digital’ in its abstract. I make this point not to castigate early career researchers but to illustrate that this cannot be dismissed as an issue of generations; rather, it is a more profound absence of engagement with the digital within French Studies.

There are numerous pistes that research in Modern Languages can take in order to ensure that digital phenomena become a routine object of research and are simultaneously factored into the methods we espouse. This article privileges the analysis of SNS in order to underline the importance of embracing new media and technologies in the evolution of our disciplinary field so as to institutionalize a new set of practices. In particular, I consider the potential of Instagram, the mobile photo-sharing social network through which smartphone- and tablet-users upload and disseminate photographs and accompanying texts, to invite us to consider two particular lines of enquiry. On the one hand, looking at what people share on SNS such as Instagram prompts us to ask how digital media drive the formation of collective identities, which often transcend traditional national boundaries and speak more to those who are part of George’s “fast castes” (1997). George describes the “fast castes” as those within society who are not merely the fastest but, more subtly, the most mobile, those with whom prestige, wealth, and power are normally identified. Second, this exploration of vernacular mythologies gives rise to the question as to what the advent of the digital means for Barthes’ mythmaking, and whether this invites a recalibration of such telling of stories about things for the twenty-first century.

This is the third part of a project looking at Instagram use at Orly Airport, outside Paris. The first (Blackwood “Languages, images, and Paris Orly Airport on Instagram”) took as its focus creativity and play, and in particular multilingual authorial control over images and comments, where I argued that what the corpus shows is a performance of multilingualism, or as Jaworski defines it, a “spectacle of multilingualism”. In other words, individuals use limited linguistic resources from other languages to reinforce their identities as globalized travellers.
rather than, more mundanely, individuals sitting in an airport departure lounge, about to take a budget airline flight to a popular holiday resort. In that same article, I also explored the tension between creativity and re-creativity online—examined in non-digital settings by Pope (2005)—a theme that finds an echo in this article. Deumert (2014) applies this tension to online creative writing but notes how the scope for creativity on digital platforms is limited: online communities have shared community preferences which can lead to the recreation of tropes rather than to original creation. I return to this (re-)creative ambiguity below.

The second part of the project (Blackwood “Frenches on wall and online”) points to the potential for multimodal, digitally mediated performances to index the transnational, and in particular the creation of hybrid language forms which are mediated not by Ile de France or standard French but by cultural resources from English, the creoles of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, and Arabic. This small body of work indicates how this present study proposes a new approach to understanding digital meaning-making as a shared process, and—by positioning itself in relation to Barthes’ mythologies—sits at the nexus of cultural studies, digital Modern Languages research, and sociolinguistics.

BARTHE'S, VERNACULAR MYTHMAKING, AND SOCIAL NETWORK SERVICES

In engaging directly with Barthes’ Mythologies as the stories we tell about ourselves but also about crucially the (consumer) society in which we live, I propose here that so-called ordinary citizens are starting to create a new set of myths. In conceiving of vernacular mythologies, I have taken inspiration from the discussions of ‘vernacular creativity’ by Burgess (“Hearing Ordinary Voices” 206), who defines this as the “creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions”. Burgess’ work looked at digital storytelling in Queensland, where she is based, and her research pre-dated the explosion in YouTube channels that exemplify online self-representation activities. More than a decade after her initial research, digital storytelling has gone mainstream, and in many cases is commodified and commercialized, but the theoretical foundations remain the same.

Later, Burgess (“remediating vernacular creativity” 117) concludes that vernacular creativity is neither elite or institutionalized; she invokes Atton’s “representations of the mundane”, which underpin vernacular mythologies and the stories we tell about our relationships with objects. For some, the term ‘ordinary’ is problematic, and for the purposes of this article, I follow Burgess’ lead where she sets up a distinction between those who obtain media power by moving into the system of celebrity, controlled by mass media, and those who are productive but without a large audience—‘cultural consumers’ to use the terminology of media studies. SNS, however, provide cultural consumers with platforms to co-create their own myths.

In rethinking mythologies from this perspective, I ask in particular what the advent of digital technologies (and specifically SNS) mean for Barthes’ and his successors’ approaches to mythmaking. Each of the artefacts discussed by Barthes is scrutinized using approaches embraced in linguistics. In his introduction to a special issue devoted to Mythologies fifty years after their publication, Smith (1) summarizes Barthes’ approach in Saussurian terms: “connotations submerge primary meanings and supplementary signifieds superimpose themselves on already existing signs”. SNS such as Instagram co-opt their users—the cultural consumers—into this process of attaching and reinforcing the meaning(s) linked to what we might have understood as signs, but which appear in posts in an ever-changing feed. Barthes’ Mythologies, clearly anchored in postwar popular culture, bring a critic’s eye to what might be dismissed as low culture, and dissect ‘things’ in a way that draws out, according to Welch (20), the associations that hold between objects and individuals or groups:

Mythologies remains a book about objects and our relationship with objects. It is a book about the importance of objects in mediating our relationships with other subjects, but also, given the way in which ordinary substances such as milk, wine and steak become infused with moral and political significance with the public sphere more generally, the sphere of collective political engagement.
Not only, therefore, do sociolinguists have a contribution to make here, but semantics and the exploration of meaning in context—and therefore pragmatics—shape our understanding of how individuals relate to things, and how this relationship is presented to others. On SNS, the stories told about our relationship to these props—the signs—are negotiated between the Original Poster (the OP) and those who engage with the images. These ‘things’ are identified and then are explicitly made to carry meaning, using captions, hashtags, and emojis given by OP and confirmed or challenged by other users. It is important to recognize at this stage that Barthes’ mythologies—to use the definition by Smith (1)—“demystify the ideological uses to which they [the ‘things’] are put”. In the discussion below, I seek to tease out the distinctions made between using props to say something about the OP (and their relationship to others) and at the same time to grapple with the ideology work that these ‘things’ do in twenty-first-century France.

Whereas Barthes the mythologist was able to write myths about steak-frites, the Citroën DS 19, and Le Guide Bleu travel guides with the authority of what Leak (6) describes as “a ‘committed’ writer”, Instagram users synchronously reinscribe meaning in the ephemera of contemporary life, affirming, nuancing, or dismissing the stories told by the OP. Instagram is primarily, but not solely, a visual medium, and here I note Barthes’ interest in photography. There is a clear intersection between vernacular mythmaking and photography, the latter likened by Barthes (“La Chambre claire” 56) to primitive theatre—“a kind of Tableaux Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face underneath which we see the dead”. Barthes’ consideration of photography as the threshold between the living image and the dead moment is worth recognizing in the context of vernacular mythologies, given its description as the “that has been” (“La Chambre claire” 176)—these mediations between people and things, which have existed and been seen.

What emerged during earlier work at Orly Airport was the use of props from everyday life (including travel essentials, reading matter, and food and drink) in order to present a specific identity to other Instagram users. In particular, I argue for the understanding of self-performance on SNS through the recreation of motifs and patterns in the visual arrangement of props to convey a certain identity of a mobile, experienced traveller with recognized good taste (Blackwood “Languages, images, and Paris Orly Airport on Instagram”). At this stage, it is useful to return to George’s concept of ‘fast castes’ as the emphasis in this article shifts away from French nationals to those individuals who pass through Orly Airport but may well be holders of a Brazilian, an Italian, or a Moroccan passport. Cronin (114) nuances the ‘fast castes’ by noting how those who are mobile acquire and display social status, where their mobility “is a powerful source of prestige”. In conceptualizing vernacular mythologies, I return to what Stafford (64) contends is Barthes’ connection of the “individualist project of finding a better life with self-delusion”, where aspiration is the cornerstone of self-delusion. Callard (4–5) argues that aspiration “is the distinctive form of agency, directed at the acquisition of values”, and many OPs on Instagram triangulate the displaying of their social status as travellers at an airport, their relationship to the things they acquire and present, and what Callard (184) qualifies as ‘self-endorsement’, where an individual actively “appraises, and attaches a positive or negative evaluation to the aspect of herself she evaluates”. Here, the OP and Barthes collide, since—as noted by Stafford (60–61)—mythmaking is “a form of social psychoanalysis that looked at the way in which our minds […] actively participate in self-delusions”. Vernacular mythmaking, as I noted when looking at self-representation on Instagram (“Languages, images, and Paris Orly Airport on Instagram” 13), elides the distinctions between those at the apex of the ‘fast caste’ hierarchy, and those sat in the unglamorous departure lounges of peripheral airports, waiting for a flight with a budget airline. On SNS such as Instagram, cultural producers present their appraisal of a set of props not only to mediate their relationships with their online entourages but also to evaluate positively—and often playfully—the importance placed on a range of ‘things’ and how these objects reflect the OP’s status and prestige.

**METHODOLOGY**

Taking Orly Airport as the site of enquiry, the starting point for vernacular mythologies has been the trope of the passport and/or boarding pass geotagged at Orly, where Instagram users upload a picture of their passport whilst waiting in the departure lounge. In my exploration...
of creativity at the airport ("Languages, images, and Paris Orly Airport on Instagram"), I established a typology of props drawn upon by Instagram users in the departure lounges in 2015, and, building on that, the data captured for this discussion of vernacular mythologies have been expanded to include the range of ephemera that are included in the images uploaded in 2019. I have modified the parameters for the data for this vernacular mythologies project, decoupling the inclusion of the passport and/or boarding pass with the props used by Instagram users. In total, there are 1,354 posts from 2015, and 1,512 posts from 2019, each of which is geotagged at the airport, and each of which includes some kind of prop. In the first two publications on Instagram use at Orly, the focus was on Francophones—as identified by their French passports—but this discussion of the discursive presentations of ‘things’ expands the breadth of participants. This openness to informants from across the world underscores the role that Modern Languages scholarship can play; Shirdastian, Laroche and Richard (2019) use Twitter to analyse brand authenticity and Starbucks, capturing 2.9 million tweets written over a two-month period in 2015. However, they removed 600,000 tweets from their corpus on the basis that they were not written in English. This Anglo-centric approach to scholarship is something that Digital Modern Languages must continue to challenge until our disciplinary approach goes mainstream.

Taking the typology of props identified from the 2015 corpus, I then captured all the images uploaded over the calendar year of 2019 featuring the range of resources deployed by Instagram users, including the starting point of the passport and/or boarding pass. This range of props can be variously described as ‘things’, or to use Welch’s term ‘objects’, or a ‘sign’ as per Saussure’s theorizing. After the boarding pass and the passport, the next most popular items drawn into Instagram tableaux vivants at Orly are drinks, followed by reading matter, with branded products and accessories some way behind. Assessing quantitatively these data is helpful only so far as it identifies the kinds of things about which individuals make myths; the frequency with which things appear in Instagram posts does not suggest statistical significance. Instead, this identification of meaning-making resources in Orly’s departure lounges across the corpora from 2015 and 2019 together permits the consideration of the formation of collective identities and, in particular, the role played by digital media in reinforcing these identities.

It is important to understand how users deploy Instagram, and how the technological affordances of the app guide the user in a specific way. Instagram’s primary function is to allow individuals to upload a photograph, taken live or from their stored images, and share it across the platform. The OP has the scope to present this image in a number of different ways. In uploading an image—or several images at the same time—the first choice the OP is invited to make is whether to apply one of the application’s 25 filters. Each filter has an evocative name, and is presented as enhancing the image by either intensifying shadows, brightening highlights, saturating or desaturating the image, or increasing one or a combination of colour tones. After this stage, the OP is presented with a number of options; in terms of the technological affordances of the app, the user can share their image at this stage. Equally, though, Instagram offers the OP the opportunity to assert some level of authorial control over their image, with the encouragement to ‘Write a caption …’, and thereby direct the interpretation of the image by the audience. When provided (since not all OPs ‘write a caption’ before sharing their image), the text, which can comprise words and emojis, serves as the initial preferred reading of the vernacular mythologies explored in this project.

The second technological affordance is the option to ‘tag people’, whereby the OP can identify other users of Instagram, who may or may not be present in the image. Where the ‘people’, to use the app’s terminology, are not visible, they may well be part of the experience being shared, or the OP is inviting them to be co-creators in this digital process. The third option is to ‘add location’ which is the function that provides geographical identification metadata, using Global Positioning System information that is captured on smartphones at the point when the image is taken. Instagram offers a selection of options from which the OP can choose, but these are user-generated ‘locations’, and for many sites there is duplication, often—and this is especially the case in popular locations—with the same place named in different languages (although this is not the case for Orly, with only the location ‘Paris Aéroport—Orly (ORY)’ available). For this vernacular mythologies project, the location as identified by the OP is the cornerstone of the data selection methodology, permitting users to categorize their image within the corpus of the thousands of others uploading images at Orly Airport. The fourth function is the possibility
to share this image and, if included, its caption, across other SNS such as Facebook and Twitter. Once shared, the image becomes available to a range of others, depending on the settings adopted by the OP. If the OP has made their account private, the image is accessible only to the OP’s followers; if the OP geotags their image, this privacy is countermanded by the act of identifying the location where the image was taken, making all images geotagged at Orly airport open for inclusion in this project.

These technological affordances point to how the digital conditions contemporary vernacular mythmaking. The geotagging of images and the use of metadata tags—in particular, hashtags—unequivocally and deliberately connect users via the motifs (such as Starbucks, in the case examined here) emplaced by the OP. The explicit use of, for example, #starbucks in a post accomplishes the shared and transnational construction of a specific identity, or part of an identity. This it does either by connecting users who wish to find posts classified by their OP to denote in some way the coffee company, or by the OP categorizing their post to include it purposely in the co-created taxonomy. Unavailable in the analogue, these metadata are fundamental in the construction of vernacular mythologies.

VERNACULAR MYTHMAKING: STARBUCKS

That food and drink make up an important part of the stories we tell about ourselves is unsurprising, and there is a wealth of scholarship on consumption patterns and rituals from across the world, not merely in anthropology but also in cultural and literary studies, history, and sociology. In the 1950s, Barthes’ mythologies include the two pairings of wine with milk and steak with chips, and he argued that they both articulated not only ‘Frenchness’ but also an individual’s self-positioning in relation to Frenchness. Garcin’s contributors some fifty years later included sushi (discussed by Jean-Paul Dubois), and Nespresso—or, more precisely, the single-use coffee capsules—(proposed by Alix Girad de l’Ain), and it is already possible to detect a profound shift away from stories about our relationships with the fundamentals of national identity to globalized consumption patterns. With a slightly different response to the globalization turn, Conrad scrutinizes what he refers to on-air as “subjects taken from our own society”, making a distinction between the mythologies drawn from France and his own mythmaking in the United Kingdom. In terms of foodstuffs, Conrad dwells on Nando’s and the cronut (the cross between a croissant and a doughnut), the former specializing in Portuguese-African chicken dishes and the latter stressing its transatlantic culinary credentials. In approaching the images collected from Orly’s departure lounges in 2015 and again in 2019, individuals home in on one particular aspect of contemporary life absent from these three collections of elite mythologies: Starbucks. In 2015, 42 include the Starbucks brand in their posts; this figure doubles to 84 in 2019. Starbucks drinks are the most frequently attested single item in the corpus and this brand emerges as the peerless ‘thing’ invoked in vernacular mythmaking.

In focusing in this section on Starbucks as vernacular mythologizing par excellence, I interrogate some of the discourses that emerge from the posts in both 2015 and 2019. The level of engagement with Starbucks in both the 2015 and the 2019 corpora is not matched by any other kind of prop identified over the two surveys. However, the frequency with which Starbucks appears in vernacular mythmaking at Orly can be explained only in part by the presence of a Starbucks franchise at the airport. The airport’s website currently lists over a dozen coffee shops, cafés, and retailers selling drinks, several of which—in particular Paul, Ladurée, EXKi, McDonald’s, Cojean, and Eric Kayser—appear in the Instagram posts geotagged at Orly. Travellers at the airport have a choice, and a significant proportion choose not only to consume a coffee from Starbucks but also to disseminate their drinking practices through Instagram. Shirdastian, Laroche, and Richard (2019: 293), using Big Data gleaned from Twitter identify four ‘dimensions’ to brand authenticity for Starbucks: quality commitment, heritage, uniqueness, symbolism. These are the categories into which they organize the 2.9 million tweets written over a two-month period in 2015 which include the keyword ‘Starbucks’. In this project, and handling far, far smaller numbers of posts, the data have been organized by adapting approaches from discourse analysis in order to discern the range of meanings attributed to Starbucks products.

At this point, it is useful to evoke the tension identified above regarding creativity and re-creativity by Instagram users, especially given the potential for users to select from existing repertoires of meaning rather than breaking new ground in the making of myths. Here, I infer
Barthes’ understanding of mythologies by returning to the Ancient Greek etymology of the word, which foregrounds the sense of storytelling. Vernacular mythologies, as such, stress the crafting of transnational, shared identities, and—in recognition of both the preferences within communities such as Instagram users and the consequences of the technological affordances—de-emphasize creativity and originality. To this end, vernacular mythologies, as attested in the examples outlined below, can—and often do—reflect and reinforce more traditional elite mythologies. Drawing on the captions provided in a range of languages, we can organize the storytelling around the themes highlighted by the OP, and then draw these together to synopsize the vernacular mythologies told at Orly.

**STARBUCKS AS PLEASURE**

One of the dominant narratives that emerges from the two corpora is the extent to which Starbucks is presented as pleasurable, although it merits noting that this is not a completely universal experience, and this is a point to which I return below. On one level, the connecting of Starbucks coffee with pleasure echoes both the branding by the company itself and also the associations made by elites. These elites include musicians (such as Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift) and actors (including Nicole Kidman and Ryan Gosling) recorded drinking a Starbucks coffee, as well as product placement in television programmes (including *Sex in the City* and the much-derided *Emily in Paris*) and films (from *Jurassic Park* in 1997 to *Isn’t It Romantic* in 2019).

Given the range of coffee retailers on the airside of Orly, individuals have a wide range of options for buying a drink; in other words, nobody is forced to buy a Starbucks product at Orly Airport. However, when individuals upload a picture featuring their Starbucks drink, there is often a clear articulation of pleasure, ranging from an emoji, through a number of positive hashtags, to entire comments framed around the enjoyment of the coffee. This organization of linguistic and visual responses to Starbucks invites greater scrutiny. In the 2019 corpus, ORY 0156 glosses their image of a Starbucks iced coffee with two emojis, the so-called drooling face and the smiling face with heart-shaped eyes: 😊口水; ORY 0400’s response to their Starbucks coffee and large biscuit is the thumbs-up sign and the OK hand sign: 👍(currency); ORY 0561 merely uses the smiling face with smiling eyes emoji: 😊. The shorthand exclamations of pleasure that these emojis articulate are sufficient for these cultural producers in order to write their mythologies about Starbucks products.

When users call on hashtags, they often have recourse to English-language words, given the reach of English on SNS and the use of hashtags to drive a high volume of users to a specific post. From the 2015 corpus, ORY 864 deploys the hashtags #enjoy, #perfect, and #happy. The collision of technological affordances (and in particular the visual mode that is Instagram) and vernacular mythologies can be usefully explored by dwelling briefly on the post by ORY 0109 from the 2019 corpus. Here, the OP, who styles themselves in their Instagram biography as a naturopath and nutrition coach, arranges their Starbucks coffee behind a slice of vegan pear and chocolate cake (Figure 1) but does not include the coffee brand in their relatively long list of metadata tags. Their purchases, also including a smoked trout and smashed avocado sandwich, are endowed with a range of positive acclamations, including #eatclean, #homemade, #healthyfood, #glutenless, #coachyourbody, and #lactosefree in English, along with French-language hashtags including #faitmaison (‘homemade’), #igbas (‘low GI’), and #viesaine (‘healthy life’). The absence of a textual reference to Starbucks does not, however, uncouple the coffee from the positive attributes, precisely because of both the significance of image in Instagram posts and brand recognition (where the viewer sees enough of the trademarked logo featuring the double-tailed mermaid in the corporate colour), which together fold the drink into ORY 0109’s pleasurable experience. Whilst positioned to the right, the Starbucks cup is in the upper part of the image, occupying a saliently significant location; I contend that its inclusion, with the logo facing the viewer, is not coincidental but, rather, a subtle yet deliberate act of vernacular mythmaking. ORY 1099 in 2015 presents their honey and almond hot chocolate (described by Starbucks as “Mocha and Almond syrup blended with steamed milk; topped with chocolate whipped cream and finished with swirls of mocha and honey drizzles”) and cookie as a #gourmandise (‘sweet treat’). Whilst these vignettes are not necessarily everyone’s idea of pleasure, the vernacular mythmakers at Orly point to the positive attributes that they bestow upon Starbucks products.
This near-beatification of Starbucks drinks is neatly summarized by ORY 745 in 2015, who explicitly cites the three items in their image (“Ticket to Valencia, Starbucks, and Society magazine”), plus the item missing from the picture, namely “the love of my life” (Figure 2). ORY 745 reaches their peroration with the hashtag #labelleviequoi (‘isn’t life beautiful’), where they invite the viewer to confirm their judgement on the material they have to hand. ORY 745 frames their experience at Orly airport, textually foregrounding the tickets to Valencia and arranging the image so that they sit in direct sunlight. Meanwhile, the Starbucks drinks occupy the visually significant left-hand side of the image, even if their importance is countered by the way the light falls. Discursively, Starbucks stands second in ORY 745’s list, ahead of Society magazine. Starbucks is clearly a fundamental in the positive experience of travel presented here, and whilst there are no responses given to the original comment, 16 users have liked the post.

Going beyond the relatively straightforward association of Starbucks with pleasure, some vernacular mythmakers consider the ideological work done by this brand of coffee. In the 2019 corpus, ORY 417 touches on the point made at the start of this section, with the text ‘Product placement’ as the only caption for their post. The image, featuring the OP holding the viewer’s gaze, with two branded espresso cups in the centre and the brief caption, recognizes the mechanisms of consumerism; this ‘ordinary’ user of Instagram, waiting at Orly Airport,
plays with the trend for embedded marketing. Unlikely to be receiving any remuneration from Starbucks—not least given that the OP only has 247 followers—ORY 417 notes in two words the commodification of coffee and draws attention to how Starbucks contributes to the architecture of consumerism.

**STARBUCKS AS REST**

Another relevant discourse reproduced on Instagram is that of Starbucks as rest—this is the consumption of a coffee as an opportunity for respite from the pressures of daily life or, within Orly airport, the pressures of air travel. Several posters use the French term ‘pause’, meaning ‘break’ or ‘rest’, such as ORY 230 in 2015 who refers explicitly to a “Pause Starbucks”, or ORY 0136 from 2019 who opens their post with the words “Pause obligatoire #starbucks”, using three times the emoji of the beaming face with smiling eyes. The contrast between the hurried existence of international travellers and taking time for a coffee and an orange juice from Starbucks is explicitly set up by ORY 007 in 2015, who opposes the hashtag #jereviensvite (‘I'll be back soon’) with #pause, confirming at the same time that this break is before they head off to Las Palmas.

**STARBUCKS AND MISSPELLED CUSTOMER NAMES**

A motif that is attested in the 2019 corpus but which does not appear at all in the 2015 dataset is the misspelling of customers’ names. This theme is the one that most vividly conveys the idea of vernacular mythmaking, given its roots in SNS, and the extent to which ‘ordinary’ users both recognize how the myth speaks to our relationships with things and others, and also—crucially—does important ideological work in connecting Starbucks to consumerism in late modernity. From around 2016 onwards, there has been considerable conjecture (online and in printed media) that there is a secret company policy at Starbucks to encourage baristas deliberately to misspell the name given by the customer on ordering their drink (see, for example, Palmer). The premise is that the misspelled name, written on the takeaway cup given to the customer, prompts the individual to disseminate across SNS a picture of the branded cup featuring the misnomer. The consequences of this are several, but for conspiracy theorists, the primary intention of the misspelling is to provide Starbucks with greater visibility online as part of a covert advertising campaign. For consumers, the appearance of a Starbucks cup in their SNS feed can be seen as signalling the acquisition of social status, given the brand’s evident currency. Mythmaking around the misspelled name is relatively widely attested in the 2019 corpus, with 7 of the 84 OP who feature a Starbucks drink in their post commenting on the name given by the barista.

ORY 0159 adorns their comment on the changing of their name to VERgiNie [sic] with three emojis, 😂😭😂, a smiling face flanked on each side by the emoji for rolling on the floor, laughing. ORY 775, a Spanish national called Juan-Carlos, arranges the image of his Starbucks cup to foreground the misspelled name Rwan-Carlos and, with emojis of rolling on the floor laughing and faces with tears of joy, quips in his caption ‘that’s how they understand my name’. ORY 1383 highlights how their name was spelled differently in Bali in comparison to how it is done in Paris, pointing to their status as a highly mobile individual, able to visit remote Indonesia. They use three emojis in their caption: 😳抻抻五十, the woman shrugging her shoulders to suggest incomprehension, the see-no-evil monkey, for someone who does not want to see something, and the smiling face with open mouth and cold sweat. The misspelling of names can be addressed wittily in posts, such as by ORY 0321 in 2019 whose name, Tiago, is written as ‘Diago’, prompting inclusion of the misspelled name in the caption followed by the acronym FTW, meaning ‘for the win’, which is regularly used sarcastically in digital discourse.

ORY 0188 in 2019 devotes considerable space to the misspelling of their name, and uses a range of hashtags in order to articulate the breadth of their response and, equally, to draw other users to their post via the metadata tag (Figure 3). The run of comments is worthy of scrutiny, since ORY 0188 exemplifies vernacular mythmaking in their post. They open with a one-word question “Vraiment?” (‘Really?’) and then quote their misspelled name followed by three exclamation marks. The hashtags are then sequential, responding to each other and dialoguing with themselves rather than with interlocutors. Having named their coffee (a large, zero-fat, vanilla
cream latte), they then quip that #cenestpasducafe (‘it’s not coffee’), and immediately bring in their misspelled name with #cestpasmonprenom (‘it’s not my name’). The narrative is then amplified by the switch to English for the two hashtags #mistake and #starbucksmistakes which have been used in 953,000 posts and 260 posts respectively. ORY 0188 cites their misspelled name as a further hashtag, followed by #really, echoing the opening words of their caption. They then revert to French for #aucunrespect (‘no respect’), which they immediately qualify with #lol to indicate the light-hearted nature of their response. It is amongst the remaining hashtags that the OP engages most explicitly in vernacular mythmaking, evoking the conspiracy theory of the misspelling of names by Starbucks with the hashtag #complot (‘conspiracy’).

Without the platform of a highly respected publishing house or a national radio broadcaster, ORY 0188 tells, on one level, their own story about their relation to a thing—a Starbucks coffee in this case—and their connection with other individuals who value the same thing, and then, on a second level, unveils the ideological use to which this spelling of names is put.

Not all of those who refer to a misspelled name in their caption do so with this error as the main point of their storytelling. ORY 1278 fronts the drink and the incorrect version of their name in their caption, but the main clause notes that they are heading home: “E con quest’ultimo bibtone con il mio nome storpiato si ritorna finalmente alla base dopo un lungo tour” (‘And with this final massive drink with my misspelled name on it, I’m finally on the way back home after a long tour’).

RESISTING THE ASCENDENCY OF STARBUCKS

Whilst the majority of mythmaking about Starbucks is positive, even for those who, in a range of ludic responses, engage with the phenomenon of misspelled names on takeaway cups, there is a small counteraction by a minority who challenge the dominant narrative. In 2019, ORY 0745, whose holidays have already started badly having missed their flight to Barcelona, then experiences ‘disappointment’ with the Starbucks coffee they order. Not only is their displeasure reinforced by the thumbs-down emoji but they underscore this unhappiness by the use of the emoji of the cat with the wry smile. They end by confirming that this will be the last time they order a Starbucks coffee. ORY 1067’s complaints about Starbucks are articulated in more colourful language. They recognize the free advertising Starbucks enjoys on Instagram (to which they themselves contribute), thanks to their strategy of writing the customer’s name on the cup, but they find their coffee disgusting. They dryly self-identify as both a gourmande (i.e. someone who enjoys eating, often to excess) and as a gourmet (a connoisseur of excellent food), and contend that consumption of Starbucks coffees rapidly leads to diarrhoea. To crown
their excoriation of the brand, they end their post with the emoji of the face with open mouth vomiting 😁, clearly articulating their disgust. This particular ‘ordinary’ user draws us back to the vernacular mythmaking identified above regarding the misspelling of names. Here, the OP does not lament that their name has been scribbled incorrectly on a cup, but rather critiques (in French) how “Everyone can advertise this brand on Instagram, all because they write your name on a cup”. Even if an individual’s name is spelled correctly, the act of identifying cups with the customer points to consumerism. ORY 1067’s post—ironically or otherwise—fulfils the potential that they claim to criticize by the emplacement of their Starbucks cup, with logo and brand name visible, in the image uploaded to Instagram.

MYTHOLOGIES ABOUT STARBUCKS

The coffee giant that is Starbucks, with its dominance in the Global North, with its associations with homogenizing streets and districts, with the standardization of consumption patterns, and with gentrification, has almost unrivalled brand recognition. As such, it is probably unsurprising that this brand has become the subject of twenty-first-century vernacular mythologizing. For the majority of vernacular mythologists, Starbucks is a valued item which is viewed positively. It is rare for those waiting for a flight at Orly to comment on the taste of their drink; some point to the indispensability of Starbucks coffee (such as ORY 0300 who refers to ‘Morning essentials’; ORY 0573 who notes ‘Need that cappuccino thank you Starbucks’; and ORY 0757 who includes the hashtag #jamaissansmonlatte, or ‘never without my latte’). The concept of vernacular mythmaking I propose here is reinforced by the lack of invoking the taste of the actual coffee; the mythology does not centre on the primary association between this premium product and its consumers. Much more space is devoted on Instagram to the associations with the act of consuming the high-end, high-cost drink. The only OP to refer to the taste of the coffee is ORY 1067 (above) who finds it ‘disgusting’. Telling stories about Starbucks in the twenty-first century does not involve a comment on the taste of the product, but rather the range of other associations. Some, as noted above, co-opt Starbucks coffee into their resting, whilst others enjoy the game with the barista who misspells their name. With only a handful of exceptions, Starbucks connotes pleasure, the emojis drawn upon almost invariably including the smiling face or a variation of it. The metadata tags deployed to attract other users interested in specific themes are also positive, and often in English. Those more ludic, creative hashtags, often designed more to be witty than drive traffic to the post, tend to be in French but also are broadly positive.

CONCLUSIONS

Although some specific narratives dismiss SNS as insignificant, irrelevant, or even harmful, they stand as a platform for those who do not enjoy the privilege of the white, middle-class, middle-aged, Western men (Barthes, Garcin, Conrad), the likes of who do not face quite the same challenges when disseminating their views. A caveat to issue at this stage is the recognition that these ‘ordinary people’ are in possession of a smartphone and a passport, and that they are sat in an airport—so they themselves enjoy a level of privilege that should not be ignored, even if they may well be positioned towards the bottom of the fast castes hierarchy. Nevertheless, although they do not necessarily have the advantages of an established reputation, a long-standing agreement with a prestigious publisher, or the ear of BBC radio producer, they do possess enough financial capital to be able to fly. At a time of accelerated mobility, especially into Europe with forced migration achieving unprecedented prominence, the individuals whose posts feature in these corpora also boast the ownership of a highly desirable and powerful passport. Despite this hedging around the status of the individuals behind the corpora, the framing of these mythologies as vernacular stands up to scrutiny. Instagram—as well as other SNS—provides a space for ‘ordinary people’ to engage with popular culture and write the mythologies of the twenty-first century.

At the same time, there are areas where vernacular mythologies fall short of their elite counterparts as per the definitions offered by some critics. Moriarty (21) concludes that Barthes’ original Mythologies “aims to make the natural, the taken-for-granted, appear strange and remote, to establish unsuspected connections, to subvert cultural hierarchies—wrestling is compared to Greek tragedy, boxing to Jansenist theology, the riders in the Tour de France to characters from Homer”. On Instagram, in the few short lines of text of the caption, with
hashtags and emojis, and the central image(s), vernacular mythologists do not draw on references from high culture to guide their interpretation of Starbucks coffee through the lens of a particular philosophical tradition. Nevertheless, the careful arrangement of the props in their images points to a very deliberate and thoughtfully conceptualized mythology. The ephemera and personal belongings assembled in these images are not thrown together: there is a deliberate construction of a specific set of values that are disseminated across SNS. On one level, the props are expected to do identity work, saying something about the OP themselves. On another level, I contend that these Instagram users are writing their own mythologies for the third decade of this millennium, pointing to the extent to which Starbucks coffee is, to paraphrase Smith (1), the vehicle for the ideology of consumerism. In the ways outlined here, some subtle, some less so, OPs highlight how a once humble drink—coffee—has become part of the accelerated process of acquisition.

In addressing the first research question concerning the extent to which digital media in general, and SNS in particular, drive the formation of collective identities, it is initially helpful to recall the contextualization of the earlier project on creativity and play at Orly. There, I argued that the normative practices of SNS invite re-creation—in other words, the replication of others’ practices—with individuals broadly re-creating motifs established by others rather than ex nihilo, original creation (Blackwood 1, 4). Vernacular mythmaking emphasizes this approach, as demonstrated by the collective storytelling about Starbucks, with individuals from Brazil to Morocco, South Korea to France, Russia to Canada, coalescing around the shared identity of a traveller—through the relationships we forge with things, such as a branded coffee, and with other people who also have a relationship with that thing. This particular category of the fast castes is mobile, but using commercial airlines rather than private jets, armed with a smartphone, and part of the consumership of Starbucks (and other notable/notorious) global brands.

In doing so, this particular fast caste draws on Starbucks coffee and all its significations in a way that resonates with Allen’s interpretation of Barthes’ myths (36):

> Myth takes a purely cultural and historical object such as wine and transforms it into the sign of a universal value: here, the notion of a collective French identity. Wine comes to signify something, a comfortable, domesticated and yet social French cultural activity (drink wine and be French!), which hides the historical reality and tensions within and around the nation of France.

The fast caste sat waiting at Orly airport do not belong to a single national group, and hold a range of passports as a signifier of their nationalities. Thus, they endow Starbucks with a universal quality—notwithstanding the brand’s rare detractors. In vernacular mythologies, Starbucks coffee assumes significant status as the drink of choice for mobile, confident individuals who engage with the positive dimensions of globalization, such as ease of travel. Equally, and reflecting the more sinister part of Allen’s conclusions, the accelerated consumption of Starbucks coffee, and in particular its permeation of the market in France, is held responsible in part for the decline of France’s cafés, which prompted President Emmanuel Macron’s €150 m package in 2019 to save French coffeehouses. Where cafés have traditionally been part of France’s collective identity, this transnational fast caste creates part of its own collective identity on the basis of the consumption of Starbucks coffee, rather than from the local Café des Sports, Café du Commerce or Café de la Place.

The participatory nature of the internet casts a spotlight on the issue of mediation between subjects: humans engage with other humans because of their relationship to the objects in these corpora from Orly Airport—and this addresses the other research question posed at the start of this article. The advent of the digital, and specifically the accelerated penetration and uptake of SNS across the world, prompt a rethinking of Barthes’ approach to mythmaking, and the role of the elite mythologist. Whilst Barthes, Garcin, Conrad, and others have presented their mythologies to a receptive audience, the digital turn provokes a recalibration in the understanding of how stories about things, and our relationship with these things, are told. Vernacular mythologies are not told once and subsequently preserved in the pages of a book, or in a radio broadcast; they are negotiated, adapted, nuanced, and critiqued from the moment that the OP shares their post. Vernacular mythologies are, by their nature, co-created by the OP and those who engage with the post. This engagement can be a mundane affirmation (as facile as a simple ‘like’), or well-wishing ahead of a trip. These exchanges can also be commercialized,
as shown in the post by ORY 1339 from the end of December 2015, where the digital marketing team at Air France caught the hashtag featuring the airline’s name in the post and replied to ORY 1339, wishing them a happy new year. Across the two corpora, these seemingly banal exchanges lubricate human relations, with the uploading of an image including a passport providing the pretext for an exchange between friends.

As a final conclusion, considering vernacular mythologies from Orly Airport outside Paris underscores the potential for Modern Languages research to make a meaningful contribution to the burgeoning field of digital research. This promise goes beyond the ability to read and translate digital discourse in languages other than English; our disciplinary field has for a long time made the case that we do more than simply understand texts (in all their guises) written in other languages. Crucially, we also bring the recognition of cultural specificities that emerge from different linguistic communities to the analysis of digital research, and refract the material we encounter through the lenses of multilingualism and of non-Anglphone scholarly traditions. Not only do we grasp what vernacular mythologists are writing about Starbucks, but also we appreciate their positionings in relation to—in this case—France and French coffee consumption patterns as well as to travellers who pass through Orly Airport.

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