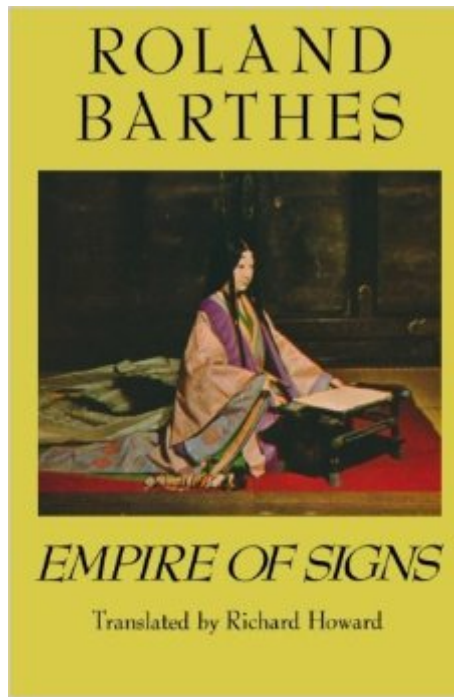


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Empire Of Signs



Synopsis

With this book, Barthes offers a broad-ranging meditation on the culture, society, art, literature, language, and iconography--in short, both the sign-oriented realities and fantasies--of Japan itself.

Book Information

Paperback: 128 pages

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Customer Reviews

It wearies to hear once more that Barthes' "The Empire of Signs" is an example of hypocritical cultural imperialism. It's been said too many times, and further it's an inaccurate assessment of the actual text to begin with. I don't see the need to apologize for this book before recommending it - simply a need to introduce it in terms of what it actually pretends to accomplish as well as what it never imagined it could do. In a word, it's hardly as though Barthes was a Heidegger. As the reviewer mentions, Barthes' shows his hand from the very beginning and does not attempt in the least to produce an objective or scholarly account of Japan. Who could imagine that Barthes, no stranger to genuine historical and anthropological analysis (though he wrote none of his own) would ever have imagined to himself that, here, he could have produced, spontaneously, a passable work of scholarship in a slim volume containing no documentation or critical notes whatsoever? If Barthes is working within any genre at all here, it's not that of scholarship but rather of the essay as first established by Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne's writings on indigenous Brazilians were in no way expected to provide an objective picture, much less construction, of life amongst the cannibals. Montaigne rather finds in the accounts he has heard of the Caribbeans an occasion to reflect on the concerns of his own culture, in particular epistemology, history and the value of the values of civilization. Montaigne was well aware of what he was about, as was Barthes. There is clearly no

need to question the merit of thorough anthropological and historical research. However, those disciplines do not exhaust the possibilities of writing on other cultures.

Roland Barthes has, in "The Empire of Signs" described his *experience* in Japan, not Japan-in-itself. To this (subjective) end, the book is fantastic. If you're looking for something more "objective" and/or dry, you'd be better off elsewhere. But this has been said about the book numerous times, and I'm not really contributing anything by repeating it. Instead, I'd like to post a review that actively engages with the text. Throughout this book, Barthes repeatedly finds himself amidst a system which directly contradicts his own in many ways, before returning back to his cleanly-woven fabric of everyday thought to analyze these contradictions. He frequently reaches a kind of baby-like state, where everything he encounters seems to be forced into a pure, senseless presence. This is a common experience to most westerners arriving in Japan. Signs do not seem to be systematized, and seem rather to float freely on an "ocean of nothingness" or something of that nature: an experience that fluctuates between excitement and terror. Actually, this kind of mood reigns wherever there is a true encounter with the external, the unfamiliar, the "other", whether it is an individual person, a culture, or even just a general situation. When our usual system of meaning doesn't work, when it breaks down in the face of a highly discrepant actuality, we become infants once again, surrounded by strange objects which do not yet have a "sense" and thus do not make sense. In "Empire of Signs", Barthes has captured this mood perhaps even better than Martin Heidegger did when he called it the "present at hand". I have only two criticisms for this book, which are minor in comparison to my appreciation for it.

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