

Luxury, myth and you

Anthony Gladman reads
the semiotics of whisky bling

Look, I get it. Whisky can be hard to like when you're not used to it. Even people in the business have quietly confessed they can find it a bit much. It's strong. It comes at you all at once. The flavours can be hard to discern. The cultural baggage around it can sometimes be... off-putting. It can leave new dram dabblers wondering: is whisky really for me?

Well here's one that's probably not: a £37,000 hyper-luxury 51-year-old whisky from The Glenrothes that you can only "access" by smashing its bottle. I shit you not. The press release (which is as close as most of us will ever get to it) burbles "just as orchids are uniquely designed to attract a single pollinator, the packaging... is

crafted to be entirely unique to its owner." This isn't whisky, friends. It's theatre.

Hyper-luxury whiskies tend to justify their cost not just through the age of the liquid (because older doesn't always equal better) but also through their packaging – hence the endless parade of Lalique crystal decanters. So here we have a fancy vessel you must smash to get at a dram that's potentially past its prime. It's performative destruction that brings to mind the time the KLF burnt a million quid in cash.

Enter Monsieur Barthes

When whisky wanders into a parallel universe like this, it's natural to reach for a guide. Fortunately, there's a French thinker who spent his career unpicking exactly these kinds of collective delusions. Roland



Photos © The Glenrothes Distillery



Barthes is the grandpappy of semiotics, a decoder of the myth and the referent, an absurd guide to an absurd landscape — who could be better?

Barthes theorised that myths are cultural constructions which pass themselves off as natural fact. A magazine cover showing a young black soldier saluting the French flag wasn't just a photograph, it was a myth about French colonial virtue and universal patriotism that said 'imperial France is good and everyone loves it.'

Does this translate to whisky? Sure as shit it does! Take our smashy bottle buyers. The hammer-smashing ritual? It's myth-making in action, transforming the mundane act of opening a bottle into cultural performance.

The heritage factory

These next few examples are just a tiny scraping of what landed in journals' inboxes in the first half of 2025. Thank fuck for email because if we still did things in print, they'd all be glossy mags blocking up the letterbox.

Glen Scotia's 50-year-old (£35,000, only 100 bottles released) solemnly declares its packaging represents a "Celtic five-fold knot, as air, water, fire and earth bind together in perfect harmony to create the fifth circle in the centre denoting the spirit." Celtic mysticism to justify thirty-five grand for aged grain

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alcohol. As Barthes put it: “What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality... and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality.” So ancient symbols are conscripted to transform what happens in industrial distilleries into something that sounds like it emerged from sacred groves.

These marketing myths transform customers, too. They become “moral guardians” rather than people buying expensive booze. Highland Park’s 56-year-old (£40,000, 170 bottles) speaks of “responsibility for whisky of this age” and positions buyers as inheriting privilege. Glen Scotia talks about “all the hands this 50-year-old would have passed through, each inheriting it and opting to let it continue its journey.”

In the 1950s Barthes examined how red wine, a totem of French national identity, was in fact made from Algerian grapes.

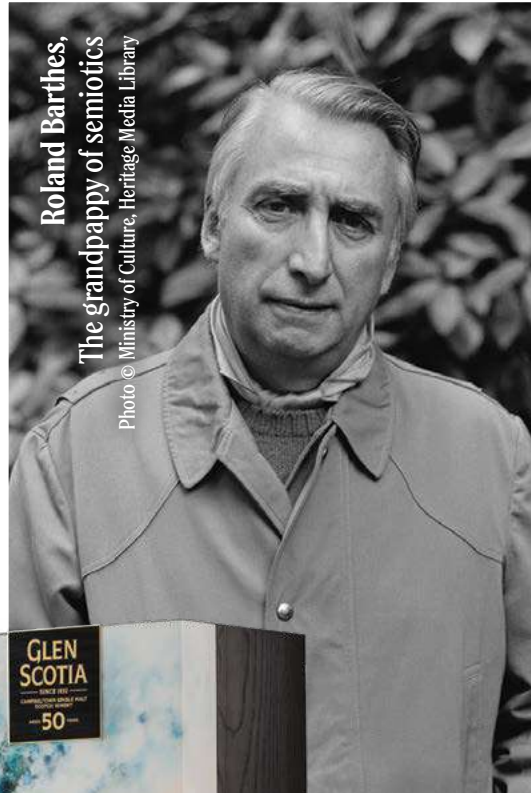
The Scotch industry likes to position whisky as inherently Scottish and Scotland as inevitably whisky soaked, neither of which is true. Scratch beneath the Highland romanticism and you’ll find many of these brands releasing mystical

Celtic marketing are owned by the same multinational corporations.

Edrington UK controls Macallan, Highland Park, and Glenrothes — three supposedly distinct distilleries all deploying identical luxury strategies



Photos © Glen Scotia Distillery



Roland Barthes,
The grandpappy of semiotics
Photo © Ministry of Culture, Heritage Media Library



Photo © Highland Park Whisky Distillery

through identical retail channels. It’s like watching Tesco Value and Tesco Finest pretend to have a rivalry. The heritage mythology isn’t organic Scottish culture, it’s coordinated corporate theatre designed to create artificial competition between brands that share the same boardroom.

Words to reveal, words to obscure

Look at the language. You’re not opening a bottle, you’re accessing cultural heritage. You’re not buying alcohol, you’re becoming a custodian. Consumption becomes stewardship; purchase becomes inheritance. The vocabulary transforms entirely to make luxury spending feel like moral virtue.

And with myth comes price. You’re

asked to drop £600–£725 for each year these whiskies spent ageing. Highland Park’s 56-year-old works out at roughly £714. A respected 25-year-old single malt might cost £200 — that’s £8 per year of ageing. Highland Park is charging nearly 90 times that rate.

Ah but you’re paying for the overheads, aren’t you? Plus the honest sweat of workers stewarding the whisky through all those long decades. Just look at ‘em, stood there in their Harris tweed, staring into the middle distance at sunset...

To which the answer is: yes! What of those people and their labour? In the marketing, disembodied hands pass these hyper-bling whiskies down through mystical chains of cultural guardianship, while the actual human hands that

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made the stuff — the distillery workers, the coopers, the maltsters — disappear entirely from the story. Instead, we get noble stewardship fantasies connecting buyers directly to Celtic spirituality. Barthes understood this perfectly: “Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things.” The real labour vanishes, replaced by mythology.

For most of us, these whiskies exist

purely as concepts. They’re signifiers without referents — symbols pointing to nothing. We’re reading press releases about mythology, not drinks. The bottles exist primarily as marketing photography and auction results.

Which brings me to a confession. I’ve tasted one of these mythical creatures. The Glenlivet 55-year-old One of One that sold at Sotheby’s for tens of

thousands. Through sheer luck, I got to sample this supposed pinnacle of whisky artistry, this cultural artefact worth more than most people’s cars.

And? It was fine. Rather nice, even. But not transcendent. Not life-changing. So when new whisky drinkers wonder “is this really for me?” — having tasted the pinnacle of the industry’s mythology, I can tell you the answer has nothing to do with price points or cultural worthiness. All that

“With one eye on marketing and another on consistent quality, blended whisky put Scotland on the map

cultural construction, and underneath was a perfectly pleasant whisky that happened to be older than the internet. The emperor’s new dram, you might say.

Shift windows

Now I’m not some boiler-suited cultural Marxist demanding we all drink the same Worker’s Whisky. It’s OK to buy and enjoy bottles that are special, even fancy-pants if you like. A 25-year-old single malt from a respected distillery costs more than a standard blend for perfectly understandable reasons. But somewhere along the way, the industry has pushed beyond rational pricing into something approaching performance art. And here’s the clever bit: when £40,000 bottles exist, everything else starts to look reasonable by comparison...

Whisky can be good without being a lot of other things, among them Scottish, expensive and exclusive. In the 1950s Barthes wrote “the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn... Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?” So here’s a new one you might like: the best whisky is made by people who care about how it tastes, and the best whisky is drunk by people who care about how it makes their friends feel. If you like that, then whisky really might be for you.