Introduction

Boris Wiseman

The chapters in this volume aim to demonstrate the continuing relevance and productiveness of Lévi-Strauss's writings for an understanding of the contemporary world. They are emphatically turned towards the *future* of Lévi-Strauss's ideas and theories, their future not only for anthropology, but also philosophy, aesthetics, literary criticism, politics and other areas still. Such an aim does not imply an unconditional acceptance of his ideas, of 'structuralism' or of any kind of orthodoxy. Far from ignoring the criticisms and controversies that have surrounded the dissemination of Lévi-Strauss's thought, these essays have made criticism, contestation and opposition central to the movement forward that they attempt. In *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964a; 1969d; 1970),[1] Lévi-Strauss traces a series of narrative inversions that show that a Bororo myth about the origin of rain-water (the 'reference myth' M1) is a transformation of a group of myths (M7–12) told by a neighbouring Gé population, about the origin of fire. Myths die out, we subsequently learn, when they cease to engender transformations or when they can only transform by becoming something else: a legend, a novelette or simply history. The same could be said about the works of any major thinker; they die out when they cease to engender transformations. The fundamental aim of the readings that follow is to partake in the transformational process, to reread and thereby reinvent the meaning of a series of texts that are far from having exhausted their generative potential, their ability to give rise to new variants that, like the myth-become-legend, break with the past and provide new points of departure. The condition of such transformations is attentiveness to the letter of Lévi-Strauss's texts, to their explicit and implicit fabric of meaning. The readings that follow do not simplify or reduce complex ideas to convenient sound bites. But neither do they unnecessarily obscure or mystify an author often deemed to be difficult. The aim of this volume is to move the debate forward by contributing to a better understanding of Lévi-Strauss's ideas, which it achieves through a kind of virtual interdisciplinary dialogue.

Lévi-Strauss, who has always been suspicious of fashions, once remarked that there were in France only three structuralists: Georges Dumézil, Émile Benvéniste and himself. I interpret this as a warning against the temptation to

dissolve Lévi-Strauss's thinking in the homogenising cloud 'structuralism' (the fad, not the system of thought), and as an invitation to be attentive to the specificity and distinctiveness of his writings. In this spirit, the chapters in this volume (see below for a detailed presentation of them) provide a sharply focused re-examination of these writings, of the complex and multifaceted project perused by Lévi-Strauss, of its articulations, its development, its ambiguities and its place in the broader contexts that shaped it and that it has shaped. For, to understand Lévi-Strauss's works properly, one needs to read them with an eye for their connections to their many sources of inspiration – Rousseau, Wagner, Goethe, Proust, Jakobson, and Mauss and others are all discussed in what follows – and for the often secretive relationships those works entertain with one another. Each of his works should thereby take on a new meaning, just as a painting, with which one believes to be familiar, takes on a new meaning when seen as part of a major retrospective which places it side by side with earlier and later works by the same artist, and by other artists belonging to the same sphere of influence.

One may legitimately ask whether versions of 'structuralism', invented *a posteriori* by certain post-structuralist critics, have substituted themselves in the popular imagination at least, for the real thing. These caricatures sometimes present structural anthropology as a kind of quest for binary opposites or reproach it for its alleged formalism. It is seen, in such contexts, as a kind of decoding exercise, whereby signifiers are correlated on a one-to-one basis with their signifieds. In such contexts, post-structuralism is presented, in an equally caricatured way, as an exploration of the 'unstable effect of a never-ending process of signification' (Potts 1996: 19). (Classic post-structuralist readings of Lévi-Strauss's works, such as those by Derrida, are, of course, much more complex than this.) According to such a summary, one would have to label Lévi-Strauss a post-structuralist thinker, if such labels have any meaning. The whole point of the *Mythologiques* (1964a; 1966a; 1968; 1971a), for example, is to show that myths do not have meaning in themselves, but only in relation to each other, hence the need to analyse them in the course of their transformations. Suzanne Saïd (1993: 98) is right to point out that Lévi-Strauss's theory of primitive myth belongs in the allegorical tradition of mythical exegesis which originated in classical antiquity (Lévi-Strauss is a great admirer of Plutarch's writings on myth). However, one needs to qualify this view by adding that it resists assigning to myths a single or fixed coded meaning that predates, as it were, the myths themselves. Hence, Lévi-Strauss criticises Freud's readings of classical mythology, on the grounds that they always favour the psycho-sexual code. For Lévi-Strauss, a myth is not a code so much as a superimposition of multiple codes in which there is no original meaning, no founding or grounding 'signified'. His aim is not to crack the code of myth, in the manner of classical allegorical readings (e.g. in Book XX

of the *Iliad* Apollo is fire, Poseidon, water, and the battle of the gods, a battle of the elements). Rather, it is a vast tracking exercise in which he follows, from one end of the American continent to the other, the 'logic' by which myths transform as they are adapted by successive indigenous groups to solve a series of local problems and paradoxes. Amerindian myths are not simply construed as *structures* but also as *forces* that require that the mythographer and his or her reader experience their generative potential and thereby undergo a process of personal transformation, a kind of partial conversion to a mytho-poetic mode of thinking.

More fundamentally still, to follow the development of Lévi-Strauss's thought is to follow one of the major stages in the 'decentring' of twentieth-century Western thought as it has come into contact, via anthropology, with other cultures and modes of thinking. These contacts are not new. However, the development of anthropology over the last century has profoundly modified what it means to experience a culture that is 'other'. Lévi-Strauss, as an anthropologist, has contributed to this new openness (which is not without its own problems and drawbacks, including ethical ones). For the anthropological critique of ethnocentrism – which has shown the constructed nature of our particular cultural point of view – is the condition of access to an understanding of cultural difference; it is what enables us to start to genuinely see and hear other cultures and hence be transformed by them. The value of the confrontation with otherness – or rather with others – is that it results in a modification of our own modes of perception and understanding. It can never result in a fixing of meanings, a simple decoding of signifieds. As Derrida remarks:

Ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a de-centring had come about: at the moment when European culture – and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts – had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference. (2005: 251)

One might also have cited Foucault, here, who devoted part of the conclusion of *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les choses*) (1977) to a joint portrait of psychoanalysis and anthropology (it is clearly *structural* anthropology he has in mind), which he characterises in terms of their shared dislocated position within the field of the 'human sciences', a field in which they have no designated place but which they traverse in its totality, addressing all of its disciplines, modifying their methods, their aims and objectives and the connections between them.

It will already have become obvious from what precedes that it is inadequate to reduce structuralism to the application of a method of analysis. Structural linguistics does not provide Lévi-Strauss with a set of recipes for analysing social phenomena. Linguistics is a body of knowledge and

concepts – and indeed metaphors – on which he draws and which he transforms to elaborate his own model of culture. This is apparent, for example, in his ideas about kinship systems, which he construes, by *analogy* with the structure of the phonological system of a language, as a network of differential relations between nuclear families, and one, furthermore, in which the relations are more important than the terms they relate.

Lévi-Strauss does indeed explain the relationship between the symbolic systems (e.g. kinship nomenclatures) that make up social reality and that reality itself in terms of a *langue/parole* distinction (the 'symbolic order' – to use the Lacanian phrase in a somewhat modified sense – he is in effect saying, has an unconscious origin).[2] However, not only is the 'symbolic order' that is realised by any given society always unfinished (1950a: 23; 1987a: 22), it never coincides exactly with its 'ideal', i.e. unconscious, template. There is a mismatch, he recognises as early as 1950, between the level of '*langue*' (the 'emic') and that of '*parole*' (the 'etic'). History, in particular, introduces extrinsic elements that distort or modify a society's underlying symbolic structures (1950a: 20–1; 1987a: 17–19). This is what happens when the social institutions invented by one population are reshaped or distorted as they come into contact with those invented by another, neighbouring population. Furthermore, the different kinds of symbolic systems constitutive of a given society transform at different paces and are thus always incommensurable (1950a: 20–1; 1987a: 17–19).

A close rereading of early essays such as the *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1950a; 1987a), 'The Sorcerer and His Magic' and 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' (both originally published in the 1940s (1949b; 1949c)) – essays that had a profound impact on Lacan, who refers to them in his seminal 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' (1949) and 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' or 'Rome Discourse' (1953) – reveals a typically post-structuralist interest in what happens at the margins of the 'symbolic order'. In these essays, Lévi-Strauss is concerned with individuals – shamans, psychopaths, the physically and mentally ill – that the social group places at the borders of the 'symbolic order', requiring that they create symbolic syntheses out of what one might think of as the residues of dominant discourses, fragments that do not quite fit in any collective system of representation. What he calls the 'shamanistic complex' (1963a: 179; 1958a: 197) is an intricate social dynamic involving the shaman, his or her victims or patients, and the social group as a whole. It brings to light, at the very core of social interaction, a constant negotiation in the supply and demand of signifieds and signifiers. At one pole of social life, we have the suffering individual, for whom the experience of pain is made worse by a deficit of signifieds (his/her experiences mean something, but he/she does not know what). At the opposite pole, shamans are professional

providers of signifiers (their chants, myths, magical tools, etc.), which they possess in *excess* and which they provide for their patients, along with a narrative that incorporates inchoate impressions into a story.

At a yet deeper level, these essays are concerned with an issue that, in recent years, has come to occupy the centre stage in social theory as well as literary studies – that of the body/sign interface. They bring to light the way in which the social is projected onto, and shapes, the corporeal. The ultimate signifier of the Amerindian medicine song analysed in 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' is the patient's own suffering body. What the shamanistic complex reveals is the inescapable fact that the complementarity of the psychic and the somatic is written into the very structure of the individual's relationship to the social group to which he/she belongs. This is what explains the 'efficacy' – therapeutic or otherwise – of the shaman's symbolic manipulations. And perhaps also those of the artist?

Lévi-Strauss's texts form a complex interrelated whole – but not a *closed* system – a constantly evolving, multifaceted project. They cannot be reduced to the exposition of a reproducible *method*. Their 'scientific' value lies elsewhere: in the reflexive movement, for example, whereby the efficacy of the concepts and models that he deploys is constantly appraised and evaluated, so that one is presented at once with a series of analyses and a kind of running commentary on them. Structural anthropology has indeed taken formalisation to a much further point than many other social theories. The elucidation of patterns of kinship exchange in his early works required collaboration with the mathematician A. Weil. Lévi-Strauss's study of the patterns of mythical transformations led him to formulate his famous canonical equation:

$$fx(a) : fy(b) :: fx(b) : fa^{-1}(y)$$

These formalisations are provisional attempts at describing a complex reality, not a representation of some fixed truth or final cause of the phenomena being studied. They are put forward in the spirit of something *tried out*. The canonical equation captures a formal pattern in the genesis of myths, a kind of double twist (see Maranda 2001: 4). It is essentially chiastic in structure and verifies an intuition that may well have been arrived at via other routes, namely the recurring importance, in creative mechanisms, of a certain kind of inversion, which rhetoricians also understood very well. It does not attempt to reduce mythical thought to a formula but simply to capture something of its creative dynamism. To demystify this four-term homology, whose structure is also intimately related to that of analogical thinking (it is a twisted version of A: B :: C: D), one need only remark that, in principle at least, it could be translated into a sound pattern and, for example, played on a piano. It is telling that if one is to follow Lévi-Strauss to the most abstract point

6   *Boris Wiseman*

of his formalism, one ends somewhere else, in music, aesthetics or poetics. I do not have the space to do so here, but it would be possible to trace the idea at the core of what Jakobson calls the poetic function – 'the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination' (Jakobson 1960: 358) – to Lévi-Strauss's theorisation of classificatory systems in *The Savage Mind* (1966b) and his understanding of the structure of myth, in which narrative *sequences* are also determined by underlying non-sequential equivalences (nature = raw; culture = cooked).

One should substitute in place of the cliché of Lévi-Strauss as a kind of austere scientist, that of an explorer of boundaries. Lévi-Strauss famously described anthropologists as the astronomers of the social sciences (*Structural Anthropology*) (1963a) because they use the *distancing effect* that arises from the contact between the members of different cultures as a tool of understanding. The journey to the boundary does not, however, yield what one expects. For example, the attempt to use mathematics to grasp the structures of transformation in the genesis of myths leads to the discovery that there is already geometry and algebra contained in the images deployed by mythical thought. The relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the close and the far is never a relationship of simple juxtaposition or even opposition, but rather a mutually constitutive dynamic tension which often leads to paradox and reversal. This may explain why Lévi-Strauss so often conceives of the self–other relationship in terms of the figure of chiasmus.[3] Finally, one must also see Lévi-Strauss as more than a scientist, as a writer, in the Barthesian sense. And indeed, the *Mythologiques* is arguably one of the twentieth-century texts that perhaps comes closest to fulfilling Barthes's ideal of the *texte scriptible* (writerly text): a collage of citations, with multiple entries, whose order of reading can be modified and which requires of the reader a perpetual work of assembly, and hence act of creation. With the *Mythologiques*, the analysing/reading subject is, as it were, internalised by mythical discourse, which ends up generating its own analyst/reader (Lévi-Strauss *follows* the paths of transformation dictated by the myths themselves). One might say about the analyst/reader of the *Mythologiques* what Apollinaire says about Autumn crocuses in the poem by the same name, to which Lévi-Strauss devotes a revealing essay in *The View from Afar* (1985a), namely that they are like 'mothers' daughters of their daughters'.

[∗∗∗]

The chapters in this volume, all specially commissioned with the exception of that by Philippe Descola, are grouped together in four parts – 'Society and culture'; 'Myth and mind'; 'Language and alterity' and 'Literature and aesthetics' – which correspond to some of the key domains in which Lévi-Strauss has made major contributions to contemporary thought. The first part

covers key epistemological issues in the anthropological study of other cultures and societies and explores, in more concrete terms, the nature of social organisation.

Society and culture

What is perhaps most striking about the opening chapter of this volume, by Sorbonne philosopher Denis Kambouchner, is its refusal to treat Lévi-Strauss's ideas as a finalised system of thought. Kambouchner reconstructs Lévi-Strauss's grappling with problems and searching for solutions. And in this particular instance, the searching for solutions has continued in the form of a dialogue, since Lévi-Strauss has responded to Kambouchner's chapter, adding his own final twist to the argument developed here (see below Lévi-Strauss's letter to the author). This argument is concerned with Lévi-Strauss's complex and ambivalent relationship to humanism. In the homage he pays to Rousseau in *Structural Anthropology II* (1976a), Lévi-Strauss stigmatises a 'corrupt' and 'narcissistic' humanism that is the flipside (mask) of a vast project of domination. However, at the same time, in other parts of his works, Lévi-Strauss suggests that humanism, in its oldest and most general forms, is by nature connected to the anthropological project of studying the diversity of human cultures. Kambouchner shows that structural anthropology, beyond this constitutive tension, despite its propensity to dissolve subjectivity in broader social structures, despite its rejection of any form of direct identification with the populations it studies, despite its negative (entropic) view of history, nevertheless may be seen to formulate a humanist ideal of sorts – one that provides a good basis for ecological thought, in a broad sense of the term.

Anthropologist Michael E. Harkin, who, like Lévi-Strauss, has worked on the Northwest Coast populations of North America (Heiltsuk, Nuu-chah-nulth), pursues some of the concerns raised by Kambouchner along a different axis – the diachronic axis. What interests Harkin is Lévi-Strauss's thinking about historical processes – how they are lived, imagined and theorised, at once by those involved in them and others. History is, of course, at the very heart of the question of how cultures relate to one another and think about one another. Not least of all because different societies conceptualise historical change in different ways (which is not to say that some societies somehow exist 'outside' of history). In this connection, Harkin complicates Lévi-Strauss's opposition between 'hot' and 'cold' societies by adding to it a third category – that of 'lukewarm' societies. He also raises the key question of the extent to which Lévi-Strauss's generalisations are shaped by the specific histories of the Amerindian societies that he studied, which are all post-colonial societies whose institutions and culture bear the mark of the European invasion. More fundamentally still, he tries to imagine, drawing in part on

Sahlins's own version of structuralism, a truly structuralist history, one that goes beyond showing how 'the historical becomes embedded in mythical structures' (this volume) to analyse how, at the level of a specific society, historical actions, i.e. praxis, are shaped by and in turn shape mythical thought (i.e. ideology). The chain of events that followed the invasion of the New World was in part a function of the 'cognitive habits', as Harkin puts it, of the various protagonists involved.

The next two chapters, the first by Abraham Rosman and Paula G. Rubel, the second by Marcela Coelho de Souza – all three experienced field workers – bring us to the interconnected domains of kinship and exchange, in which Lévi-Strauss made his first major contributions to anthropology. Lévi-Strauss's ideas about kinship may be seen as an elaboration of Marcel Mauss's theory of exchange, formulated in his seminal work *The Gift*. Mauss showed, crucially, that gift-giving was one of the forms taken by a broader and more elemental system of exchanges that is essential to the elaboration and maintenance of social order. He showed that much social life was regulated by a triple unspoken obligation: to give, to receive and to return. Exchange is one of the basic gestures whereby social integration occurs. Lévi-Strauss's original – and controversial – move was to argue that marriage itself takes the form of a gift exchange, an exchange of women between social groups. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949a; 1969a) thus disentangles the myriad marital rules and customs created by many non-European societies and brings to light the basic, elementary recurring patterns according to which marital exchange takes place. In formulating these new ideas, as Rosman and Rubel show very well, Lévi-Strauss brought about a major shift in anthropological thinking about kinship. One may think of this shift in terms of a move away from theories that see the vertical relations of filiations (e.g. mother–child) as being primordial in the constitution of kinship systems, towards one that treats the horizontal relations between groups (i.e. alliance) as foundational. The radical nature of a theory that denies that the nuclear family is the basic building block of kinship systems has perhaps not quite been measured to its full extent – including by gender theorists. Crucially, Lévi-Strauss's theory also extricates family relations from biology (a point explored by Marcela Coelho de Souza), giving them a new basis in systems of exchange, which are themselves ultimately mapped onto the circuits of verbal exchange – i.e. communication. Rosman and Rubel's chapter is at heart a defence of the validity of Lévi-Strauss's core intuitions and of their applicability in the field. It shows, with reference to a number of ethnographic examples, that structures of exchange of goods and services at *rites de passage* like pregnancy, marriage and funerals are identical to structures based on marriage rules, such as they were analysed by Lévi-Strauss.

Marcela Coelho de Souza's chapter addresses some crucial questions which, despite their technical appearance, go to the core of key issues pertaining to gender theory, the construction of identity, and the foundation of social life. Are families biological or cultural entities? Where does the realm of nature stop and that of culture start? Should one even pose these questions in binary terms and, if not, how should one reconfigure our model of kinship systems? Part of the answer lies in the way that Lévi-Strauss derives concrete kinship systems from mental structures and, more importantly, in his assimilation of these mental structures to structures of exchange. Self and Other, Marcela shows, are exchange partners, constituted as terms *connected* through their *differentiation* regarding a third party (the object of their exchange). Hence, the importance of the brother-in-law in structural models of kinship systems.

Myth and mind

Lévi-Strauss's works progressively move away from the study of relatively concrete social structures, among them kinship systems, towards that of more intangible symbolic systems, such as classificatory systems (including totemism) and myths. This development in the orientation of Lévi-Strauss's thinking goes hand in hand with an increased interest in the functioning of the mind, engaged in the production of symbolic systems of all kinds – i.e. with the mind engaged in creative processes. This explains, in part, the opening up of the relevance of Lévi-Strauss's writings to other fields, among them aesthetics and poetics. It is the issues thrown up by this phase in Lévi-Strauss's thinking that will be addressed in the next section of the Companion, 'Myth and mind'. More particularly, these chapters will generally be concerned with what Lévi-Strauss calls *pensée sauvage*, a 'wild' mode of thought at the heart of cultural creation, which is rooted in an exploration of our sensory environment, and which takes as its basis what structural anthropology calls 'concrete logic' or 'logic of sensible properties'. Unlike so-called 'domesticated' thinking, a utilitarian, i.e. instrumental, mode of thought that aims to act upon and change the world we live in and thereby serve as the motor of 'progress', 'wild' thinking is essentially a disinterested, classificatory mode of thought, whose primary ambition is a kind of symbolic totalisation of experience.

The chapter by Amazonian specialist Philippe Descola explores the contradictory meanings given by Lévi-Strauss to the contrastive opposition between 'nature' and 'culture' according to the various contexts in which he makes use of it: as a tool for the structural analysis of myths and folk classifications, as a philosophical foundation accounting for the origin of society or as an antinomy to be superseded in the edification of a (monist) theory of knowledge which refuses the traditional opposition between the mind and the objective

10   *Boris Wiseman*

world. Paradoxically, Lévi-Strauss has been seen as either an advocate of a materialist conception of the cognitive process (i.e. one that explains this process by the workings of neural mechanisms) or as an epitome of intellectual dualism (according to this view, culture, a product of the mind, imposes meaning on nature). Descola will show that these diverging interpretations stem from the contradiction between the emphasis Lévi-Strauss places on the 'natural' determinations of culture (the laws of the mind are not different from those that govern the physical world) and his method of analysis wherein 'nature' and 'culture' are treated as universal categories that can be detected everywhere as templates structuring symbolic thought (in spite of the growing ethnographic evidence that most non-modern peoples do not view their cosmologies as being divided between a natural world and a social world).

The major claim made by French philosopher Claude Imbert, in 'On anthropological knowledge', is that Lévi-Strauss has made significant progress towards articulating a different conception of our mental capacities. Three linked enigmas will serve as a guiding thread throughout this philosophical enquiry: that of the provenance of the mathematical structures that underpin kinship exchange (in societies that often do not possess a formalised mathematics), that of the nature of the symbolism at work in Caduveo body painting and that of the nature of the operation, initially uncovered by Mauss, that underpins exchange. Imbert will show that, in order to solve these enigmas, Lévi-Strauss will have to rethink experience itself, in particular free it of its Kantian premises. Doing so, she will show, involves understanding the conditions of possibility of an 'adherent' logic, as she usefully calls it. Much of Western philosophy, starting with the Greeks, was concerned with a logic that is essentially propositional. This is the logic of statements and arguments whose structures of inference, for example, have been formalised in various ways. Imbert shows that Lévi-Strauss rejoins a certain Wittgenstein on the terrain of the exploration of a logic that remains rebellious to propositional articulations, a logic of colours in the case of the latter, a (mytho-) logic of qualities, forms and temporal intervals for the former. One is not all that far, here, from Baudelaire's comment about painting that: 'in certain of its aspects the art of the colourist has an evident affinity with mathematics and music' (1965: 160). And indeed, Imbert's exploration of how 'qualities function as cognitive mediators' (this volume) provides ample material for a philosophy of art.

Philosopher and anthropologist Frédéric Keck's chapter, 'The limits of classification: Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas', in many ways complements Imbert's discussion of *pensée sauvage*. 'Wild' thinking, as described by Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966b), is essentially a classificatory form of thinking that aims to extend a net of ever proliferating categories over a reality which it thereby tries to 'grasp', albeit at the level of the symbol.