Introduction: ethno-aesthetics

When Claude Lévi-Strauss was a child, his father, Raymond Lévi-Strauss, a portraitist and genre painter whose works were exhibited in the Salons de Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, gave his son a Japanese etching. The young boy used it to adorn the bottom of a box. Later, when he was old enough to be given pocket-money, he would spend it on miniature items of furniture bought from a Parisian shop called *The Pagoda*. Little by little, he assembled, in his box, a miniature Japanese house. Lévi-Strauss (2003) tells the story himself, age 77, adding that the etching is still in his possession – carefully preserved like the memory itself.

The significance of this biographeme is perhaps best viewed in the light of a passing comment made by Baudelaire in his essay 'A Philosophy of Toys', itself the recollection of a childhood memory but also a meditation on the role of the imagination in aesthetic perception. The essay, which in many ways anticipates future psychoanalytic insights into the importance of a child's play, is about the way in which children create imaginary worlds by acting on and through their toys. All children, Baudelaire remarks, talk to their toys. Baudelaire, who was fascinated by toy shops – 'Is not the whole of life to be found there in miniature – and far more highly coloured?' (Baudelaire 2003c: 199) – presents the child's relationship to his toys as a prototype of the adult's relationship to the work of art. Having characterised different forms of child-play and different kinds of toys – the cheap, improvised toys of the poor are those that spark the imagination the best, says Baudelaire – he goes on to remark that if children act on their toys, the toys may also act on the children, in particular when it comes to literary or artistic predestination (2003c: 202). It would not be astonishing, Baudelaire continues, that a child brought up among puppet theatres, grows up to view theatre as the highest form of artistic expression (202).

Was Lévi-Strauss's Japanese house a formative object of this kind? Did this paternal gift play a part in the shaping of the son's own psyche? One is here in the realm of pure conjecture. However, a number of strands

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of Lévi-Strauss's thought may indeed be traced back to this unusual toy, from which they seem to emerge. I am thinking, here, not only of personal preferences, such as his love of all things Japanese (1990; 1993b), or of specific aspects of his system of thought, such as his theory of the work of art as a 'modèle réduit' (1962b), or his assimilation of creation to a form of *bricolage* (1990; 1993b), but of the general orientation of his thought, its openness to the exotic and the distant. There is, however, yet another sense in which Lévi-Strauss's father's gift shaped his destiny, which Lévi-Strauss himself explains in the interview mentioned above, one that takes on particular significance in the context of the argument of this book. As he explains, it was this gift that was at the origin of his fascination for rare objects. Since that day, he has maintained with them, as he puts it, 'the most intimate of relations' (2003: 7). It was this gift, in other words, that turned Lévi-Strauss into a collector.

As an adult, Lévi-Strauss went on to assemble two collections of ethnographic objects for the Musée de l'Homme, the first made up mainly of Caduveo and Bororo objects brought back from his 1936 expedition, the second of Nambikwara and Tupi-Kawahib objects, brought back from his 1938 expedition (Viatte 2003). He also assembled a large personal collection of ethnographic art that he was obliged to sell in 1951. A number of Katchina dolls were bought by Jacques Lacan; other items have found their way to the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions and other museums. This collection was in part constituted in New York in the 1940s, where Lévi-Strauss had fled as a Jewish refugee. There, in the company of Max Ernst, André Breton and Georges Duthuit, Lévi-Strauss would wander the streets looking for antique dealers, whose stores and backrooms, he would later write, were like so many Ali Baba's caves (by his own admission, his contact with the Surrealists did much to shape his aesthetic sensibilities, which may in part explain his fascination with Amerindian mythology). Back in Paris after the war, he and Breton would still on occasion trawl the flea-markets.

It is perhaps this feature of Lévi-Strauss's psychology that best explains that, whatever the explicit subject matter of his many studies, there has been in nearly all his major works either a direct or an indirect confrontation with the question: what is the nature of the aesthetic object? In broad terms, this book constitutes an examination of the many different ways in which Lévi-Strauss has tried to answer this question. For, unlike many collectors, Lévi-Strauss sought to understand the nature of his 'intimate relation' to the objects that so fascinated him, such as the *xwéxwé* masks made by the Kwakiutl Indians, recognisable by their large protruding red tongues, bird-horns and cylindrical eyes. In this respect, my aim in this

book is to deal with a relatively ignored aspect of Lévi-Strauss's thought, which has been approached mainly from anthropological, sociological or philosophical perspectives. However, the drive of my argument is to show that aesthetics are an integral part of Lévi-Strauss's thought; that aesthetics and anthropology intertwine and do so at the most elementary levels of elaboration of Lévi-Strauss theories and interpretations. I have tried to show, in other words, the *mutual* imbrication of aesthetics and anthropology. Lévi-Strauss's anthropology shapes his aesthetics just as his aesthetics shapes his anthropology. I have therefore adopted, in this book, a deliberately interdisciplinary approach, one that tries to combine the perspectives of anthropology, philosophy, aesthetic theory and literary criticism. More narrowly specialised accounts of Lévi-Strauss's thought arguably fail to grasp its full significance. Addressing the question of the aesthetic in Lévi-Strauss's thought does not consign the reader to its margins. It enables one to tackle key issues about its articulation and development.

This book, however, is not only concerned with understanding Lévi-Strauss's thought on its own terms. It also tries to make a case for its relevance to contemporary aesthetic theory. In this connection, I have not so much set out to demonstrate that Lévi-Strauss was right or wrong on aesthetic or other issues, although I have formulated criticisms where I felt that they were required. Rather, I have tried to find ways of opening up Lévi-Strauss's texts to discover new meanings in them, meanings that sometimes contradict his explicitly stated positions. For example, despite Lévi-Strauss's well-known resistance to abstract art, I have tried to show, in chapter 4, that one may find in his theory of 'concrete logic' the elements of a theory of abstraction. This requires that one go beyond the letter of the text and explore its potentialities. In the process, I have tried to show that Lévi-Strauss's works are 'good to think with', as he says about the uses of plant and animal species by non-literate societies. In this book, Lévi-Strauss's thought is, thus, at once an object of study and a point of departure, a lens through which I have tried to view other objects and problems, in particular aesthetic ones. In the process, I hope to have demonstrated the continuing value of his writings.

The third and final line of argument pursued in this book emerged during the course of my analyses of the interdisciplinary connections outlined above. These raised a series of questions of a seemingly different nature (they are in fact connected), about the nature of the texts written by Lévi-Strauss and how one should read them. Although the most important part of Lévi-Strauss's works no doubt resides in the arguments and theories that he consciously and explicitly developed, as I became more and more

immersed in these arguments, it became increasingly apparent that they concealed another level of reading, that I have called, using Lévi-Strauss's own vocabulary, 'mytho-poetic'. The level of explicit discourse contains clues to deeper patterns, to which it cannot be reduced, but from which it is inseparable. Concepts and metaphors are, in Lévi-Strauss's thought, closely imbricated, just as anthropology and aesthetics are (perhaps the one explains the other). What underpins structural anthropology, beyond its conceptual content, is something more personal, a system of partially conscious ideas which are themselves deeply embedded in a series of recurring images. As we shall see, structuralism (the theory) is supported by a structural *imaginary*, whose 'logic' is essentially mytho-poetic (see, in particular, chapter 1 and the conclusion: 'Between concept and metaphor').

AESTHETICS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ART

My premise, in this book, is that one may find in Lévi-Strauss's works an aesthetics, in the philosophical sense of the term, and not simply an anthropological theory of art. Although this fact has far-reaching implications, it is one that has been seldom taken on board, except by a small number of commentators such as Claude Imbert (2000; 2004; 2005), Yvan Simonis (1980) and José Guilherme Merquior (1977), the author of the only other book-length treatment of Lévi-Strauss's aesthetic thought.[1] As Imbert rightly points out (2005: 62), it was not only out of friendship that Lévi-Strauss dedicated *The Savage Mind* to Merleau-Ponty, shortly after the latter's death. The whole of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological project is bound up with Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the enigma of our relationship to the perceptible world. Before there are linguistic structures, there are structures of perception.

The distinctive way in which Lévi-Strauss combines different kinds of theoretical discourses is brought to light when one compares his writings to those of another prominent anthropologist, this time writing in the Anglo-American tradition, Alfred Gell. For the latter, the anthropology of art and aesthetic theory are fundamentally and in principle incompatible. Gell's current appeal no doubt comes in part from his attempt to seek out a distinctively anthropological approach to art. Gell makes the point that anthropological theories of art should 'look like' other anthropological

[1] There are also sections on art and aesthetics in Marcel Hénaff's *Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Making of Structural Anthropology* (1998) and Jean Petitot's *Morphologie et esthétique* (2004). The *Magazine Littéraire* (1993) has devoted a special issue to 'Structuralism and Aesthetics'.

theories, such as kinship theory or exchange theory, and not like aesthetic theories or 'Western theories of art' (1998: 4). This is in part because he believes that anthropological theories of art should be about the pragmatics of how works of art are used to mediate social relations, and not about aesthetic 'responses'. The aim of anthropology, for him, is the study of social relations. The anthropology of art, he writes, should 'focus on social context of art production, circulation and reception' (1998: 3). For this reason, he objects to a common conception of the anthropology of art which presents it as an attempt to elucidate non-Western aesthetic systems, i.e. to determine the criteria used by non-Western societies for ascribing 'aesthetic' value – for example, why the Yoruba rate one carving as superior to another (1998: 3). For Gell, such an approach still smacks of Western art theory, which it simply transposes to 'exotic' objects, thereby partaking in an assimilation of non-Western art to the categories of Western art-appreciation. The function of such a theory is to make such objects available for consumption, as it were, by the West (1998: 3). In itself, this is not necessarily a bad thing, says Gell, but it is not anthropology.

Gell's objections to existing anthropological theories of art are grounded in legitimate concerns about the possibility of cross-cultural comparisons. Much ethnographic 'art' exists in the context of social institutions that are very different from those in which Western art exists – secret societies, for example, rather than museums or galleries. He cites the example of a decorated shield, similar to the Asmat shield reproduced in his book (1988: xxiv), which was designed to be used by warriors on the battlefield. Although a Western audience would undoubtedly recognise it as a work of art, is it appropriate, Gell asks, to talk about an indigenous 'aesthetic' response to the shield? As he puts it: 'Anthropologically, it is not a "beautiful" shield, but a fear-inducing shield' (1998: 6). There are many different kinds of responses to artefacts other than aesthetic, he points out. These may include, according to his own list: 'terror, desire, awe, fascination, etc' (6). It is these kinds of responses that Gell associates with the decorated shield, not aesthetic ones (I will return to this shield below). At his most sceptical, Gell is doubtful that all human societies, as he puts it, 'have an aesthetic' (6).

My point, here, is not about the relevance of Gell's theory for the ethnographic understanding of particular societies, and their social structures or patterns of behaviour. It is about how Gell positions his theory in relation to other disciplines and discourses and hence about the place of anthropological knowledge and understanding in a broader field. Gell's version of the anthropology of art is predicated on a series of gestures

of methodological exclusion. The basic model of these gestures of exclusion may be traced to his assertion that 'Anthropology, from my point of view, is a social science discipline, not a humanity' (1998: 3), although he does admit that the difference is an 'elusive' one. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss sees anthropology as one of the human sciences, and indeed as inseparable from a certain strand of humanistic thinking concerned with universals (1963a: 347–8; 1958: 378–9).[2] His conviction is that, as he puts it quoting Rousseau, by observing differences one may uncover similarities. Accordingly, Lévi-Strauss construes anthropology and aesthetics as inherently interrelated. In opposition to the specialisation of anthropological discourse advocated by Gell – questions arise, here, about the deeper motives behind his desire to evacuate the aesthetic from anthropology – Lévi-Strauss's works provide an example of how anthropological enquiry, construed as a form of empirical philosophy, may open onto other discourses, such as aesthetic, without compromising its specific anthropological validity or indeed the validity of the discourses with which it connects.[3]

Trying to describe what an anthropological theory of art should 'look like', Gell, who has in common with Lévi-Strauss to have been deeply influenced by Mauss, makes the following remark: 'Lévi-Strauss's kinship theory is Mauss with "prestations" replaced by "women"; the proposed "anthropological theory of art" would be Mauss with "prestations" replaced by "art-objects".' Gell goes on to say that this does not, in fact, correspond to the theory that he is about to propose in *Art and Agency*, but is a guide to his 'intentions', namely to construct a recognisably *anthropological* theory of art. Mauss is invoked, here, because his theory of exchange is the 'exemplary, prototypical "anthropological theory"' (1998: 9). Interestingly, Gell's theoretical model does fit, more or less word for word, Lévi-Strauss's analysis of Northwest coast masks in *The Way of the Masks*, which discovers in the transformational processes that the masks undergo, as they circulate from

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[2] For a discussion of Lévi-Strauss's particular conception of humanism see Denis Kambouchner's insightful 'Lévi-Strauss and the Problem of Humanism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss* (forthcoming). Kambouchner brings to light Lévi-Strauss's virulent critique of a certain form of humanism and his attempt to find the theoretical premises of a new form of humanism. For Lévi-Strauss's conception of the 'stages' of anthropological enquiry see 1963a: 354–6; 1958: 386–9. Anthropological understanding is presented as a succession of higher-order syntheses, which start with ethnography, which is based on field work and focuses on a particular social group, then moves on to ethnology, which introduces a comparative element, and finally anthropology, concerned with generalisations.

[3] For an anthropological examination of the relative value of a structuralist (i.e. semiotic) approach to art and an agency theory based approach, see Layton 2005. In this book I will try to get beyond the characterisation of structuralism in terms of classical semiotic theory. See, in particular, chapter 3, 'The Work of Art as a System of Signs'.

one population to the next, the key to the genesis of their distinctive styles. One may thus find in Lévi-Strauss's works a theory of the kind that Gell may indeed recognise as 'anthropological'. But one also finds something else in them. If one is to ask what the 'Overture' to *The Raw and the Cooked* most 'looks like' the answer may well be Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Lessing's *Laocoon* or Benedetto Croce's *The Breviary of Aesthetics*. Lévi-Strauss integrates an aesthetics into anthropology (unless it is the other way round?), with all that this implies in terms of the reorientation of both. In other words, he addresses, through the anthropological data, questions about, for example, the ontological status of the work of art (these don't arise for Gell, who simply equates the work of art with the material object), the mechanisms of aesthetic creation, the nature of aesthetic emotion (aesthetic 'responses' in Gell's terminology), the relation between indigenous and Western art, the way different art forms signify and how they are interrelated. At the same time he also draws on aesthetic concepts to develop his anthropological theories. For example, Jakobson's ideas about the 'poetic function' lie behind his understanding of the structure of both myths and classificatory systems. In each of these cases one discovers the same 'projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' (Jakobson 1981: 27). What determines the sequence of a mythical narrative is an underlying homology ('equivalence') of the type: nature : culture : : raw : cooked. Lévi-Strauss's canonical formula formalises in algebraic terms Jakobson's poetic function. More fundamentally still (see chapters 2 and 3 of this book), what Lévi-Strauss calls *pensée sauvage* is essentially an updated anthropological version of what Alexander Baumgarten called 'sensuous cognition' (Baumgarten was the first philosopher to use the term aesthetic in a modern sense). The concept of 'sensuous cognition', in its various guises, has been central to aesthetic theory, from Kant to Hegel and Deleuze, and it is also in this aesthetic context that one should view Lévi-Strauss's anthropological exploration of 'primitive' modes of thought. It is no doubt in the *Mythologiques* that aesthetics and anthropology merge most seamlessly. Here, the decoding of the many 'mythemes' used by Amerindian populations to explain the world becomes one with the analysis of the relations between myth and music (cf. chapter 7, 'From myth to music'). It is Wagner, not Saussure, who is presented as the founding father of the structural analysis of myths. No doubt, for some, this may be seen to detract from the purely anthropological value of this work. But Lévi-Strauss has made a persuasive case for the inseparability of anthropological and aesthetic problems; problems which anthropologists such as Gell have tried to keep separate.

The distinctiveness of Lévi-Strauss's approach is illustrated by his brief discussion, in *Look Listen Read*, of the notion of rhythm used by Boas in his work on the decorative designs made by indigenous Alaskan populations. Boas, who was interested in the distribution of motifs and colours in textiles, saw spatial 'rhythms' as deriving from temporal rhythms, in particular those based on physiological motor phenomena. Lévi-Strauss, drawing on Benveniste, points out that the concept of rhythm was developed first by the pre-Socratics in a spatial sense, and was only subsequently applied to temporal phenomena, such as dance, by Plato. This reversal of the common understanding of the origin of the notion of rhythm provides Lévi-Strauss with the opportunity to reflect on its inseparability from the concept of totality (see the next chapter) and draw out its more general aesthetic relevance. A recurring pattern, he points out, is only perceptible within a closed rhythmic cell constituted of a limited number of elements (1997: 165; 1993a: 157). This leads to a general definition of rhythm – 'The idea of rhythm encompasses the series of permutations required to turn a collection into a system' (1997: 165; 1993a: 157) – which Lévi-Strauss goes on to apply to other kinds of objects, among them three Wagnerian motifs: 'Brünhilde's sleep', 'the bird' and 'the maidens of the Rhine'. Each of these motifs seems distinct, but was in fact created by modulating the same five, recurring notes (one recognises, here, the combinatorial logic that is also characteristic of Lévi-Strauss's own way of thinking). The procedure recalls the decorative methods of the Alaskan populations studied by Boas. As Lévi-Strauss points out, the core aesthetic problem raised by the study of rhythm, be it in Alaskan needle-cases or Wagner's operas, is why the 'artist' chose one particular rhythm (permutation of elements) among all those possible. The value of Lévi-Strauss's approach, here, lies in the way in which he interconnects seemingly unconnected problems, linking up anthropological concerns with aesthetic ones, needle-cases and Wagner. One answer to the question of what determines the choice of one rhythmic pattern over another is the ease with which it may be recognised, which suggests a further link to the aesthetic/anthropological question of style (Egon Schiele's landscapes are as unmistakably his as his famous nudes).

I shall return below in more detail to the problems associated with formulating cross-cultural theories of art. But it is worth providing, here, a response to Gell's point that the designs on the Asmat shield were not apprehended 'aesthetically' by the Asmats or their enemies in the battle-field. Fra Angelico made paintings and frescoes whose purpose was primarily devotional, although he also belonged to the fifteenth-century

equivalent of an artistic 'avant-garde' (his new way of representing space was crucial for the development of Renaissance art). Many of them were destined for the walls of the monasteries of the Dominican order to which he belonged and were seen only by the friars who lived there, retired from the world. These kinds of images, and others like them, are viewed 'aesthetically' today, in art galleries or museums, by largely atheist audiences (the monks' cells that Fra Angelico decorated in Florence have today been turned into a museum). What these two very different kinds of viewers read into Fra Angelico's images diverges greatly. But the experiences of the Florentine friars who were Fra Angelico's contemporaries and the modern gallery-goer are not entirely incommensurable, nor indeed mutually exclusive. They only appear as such to those who hold a 'purist' conception of aesthetic experience. But this experience is, on the contrary, mixed, impure, made up of many kinds of sensory, emotional and ideational 'responses', capable of provoking, in Gell's words, 'terror, desire, awe, fascination' (1998: 6), all of which are integral to what we call 'beauty'. The fascination that Fra Angelico's world of delicate angels with multicoloured wings continues to hold suggests that what we call 'aesthetic emotion' is not altogether unrelated to a certain sense of the sacred or the supernatural. Just as religious experiences – as anyone who has attended a religious ceremony will know – may also be aesthetic experiences of sorts. Baudelaire famously contrasted an atemporal Beauty to a more ephemeral 'modern' beauty, in which he found the inspiration for many of his poems. He sought this beauty in the scenes of daily life unfolding around him in the streets of Paris. Cross-cultural comparison invites one to view 'aesthetic' experiences as part of an expanded field, a 'total' experience in the Maussian sense, which would enable one to see the compenetration of seemingly unrelated phenomena. Psychoanalysis proves a similar point. There are intriguing parallels between poetic language and the language of the psychotic (which is not to deny the pathological nature of psychosis). The disturbing yet aesthetically striking dream-image of a pack of wolves perched in the branches of a tree, taken from Freud's famous 'wolf-man' case, is a good example of the kind of compenetration evoked above. From an 'aesthetic' point of view, the Asmat shield can be *at once* a beautiful shield *and* a fear-inducing shield. As André Breton famously put it: 'Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all' (Breton 1999: 160). The relativity of cultural values does not preclude a trans-cultural aesthetics; it simply dictates that it should be a decentred aesthetics. Finally, art objects acquire meaning and value through those who 'consume' them. In as much as these objects

are circulated and passed on in time, they acquire different meanings. Each of these meanings needs to be considered as integral to the overall meaning of the object and seen in relationships to one another. There is no 'original' meaning, except perhaps in a strictly chronological sense.

The considerations that precede explain why this book is closer in spirit to that of Simonis (1980) than to that of Merquior (1977). Merquior sets out to *extract* from Lévi-Strauss's works those pages that are devoted to art and aesthetics. In doing so, he dismembers Lévi-Strauss's works. Merquior's book is insightful, and usefully contextualises structuralist aesthetics, in particular in relation to phenomenology. However, it is framed in such a way as to leave much of what is interesting about Lévi-Strauss's writings in the dark: the betwixt and between. My argument is closer to that made by Simonis, who identifies what is undoubtedly a fundamental Lévi-Straussian turn of mind, a certain desire to cross in reverse the divide between nature and culture and apprehend the emergence of culture, as it were, from the point of view of nature. This is what Simonis terms Lévi-Strauss's 'passion for incest', a desire to return to a point prior to the formulation of the incest taboo, the first social rule. For Simonis, this project is paradoxical. It cannot be fulfilled 'metonymically' – i.e. by scientific discourse. The impossible passage from language (culture) to silence (nature) can only be achieved at the level of metaphor. In order for structuralism to be able to trace the route that leads from reciprocal exchange back to the 'silence of nature', it must therefore become, in Simonis's words, a 'logic of aesthetic perception' (1980: 307). Simonis seeks out the model of structuralism in Lévi-Strauss's theory of music, a cultural creation that attains meaningfulness by patterning our inner sense of time, thereby allowing us to 'perceive' (natural) rhythms – psychological, cardiac, respiratory, visceral – that would otherwise remain alien to conscious perception, and hence 'silent'. There is a silence at the core of language, which is culture's point of articulation to nature (1980: 306–7). The attempt to understand or think this point of articulation is an impossibility, since we cannot think outside of the symbolic order. But music, about which Lévi-Strauss says that its listeners are its silent executors, shows another way of understanding the passage from nature to culture, i.e. of understanding the 'silence' inherent in culture (nature's partition), one that is aesthetic (1980: 307).

What Simonis grasped so well was not only the connected nature of the aesthetic and anthropological dimensions of Lévi-Strauss's thought, but that the latter's attempts to grasp these connections were inseparable from a question that crosses over into critical theory: what kind of 'language' is