

Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology and Aesthetics*. Boris Wiseman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 264 pp.*

Reviewed by Lee Haring

As he approached his hundredth year, the doyen of world anthropology convinced himself that no ethnographic museum could offer its visitors an authentic image of societies totally different from our own. Objects he collected in Brazil, which he presented to the incipient Musée de l'Homme, he now found to have merely documentary interest; the death of cultures was a good and sufficient reason to approve the mutation of the ethnographic museum into an art museum. So Claude Lévi-Strauss gave his blessing to the death of the Musée de l'Homme and the birth of the scandalous Musée du Quai Branly (a story splendidly told in Benoît de L'Estoile's *Le Goût des autres* [2007]). How timely, then, that Boris Wiseman, who knows Lévi-Strauss's work better than most of us, should turn us back to that work, to show its "mutual imbrication of aesthetics and anthropology" (p. 3) and to contend that it is relevant to contemporary aesthetic theory. His book explores the many different ways in which Lévi-Strauss has tried to answer the question, "What is the nature of the aesthetic object?" (p. 2). His proposition is simple: for Lévi-Strauss, "aesthetics and anthropology intertwine" (p. 3) at all levels. To demonstrate this intertwining, the author "tries to combine the perspectives of anthropology, philosophy, aesthetic theory and literary criticism," and connects Lévi-Strauss's thought to contemporary aesthetic theory (p. 3). Behind it all, he says, there is a "structural *imaginary*" (p. 4), analogous to Fredric Jameson's political unconscious. His book is a major achievement.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has always been passionate about art. His earliest article, written when he was no more than 17, was about Cubism, which he later relegated to the rank of interior decoration. A reader of *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss 1966) should be surprised that the author's introduction to a book about "primitives" is a discussion of the realistic treatment of a lace collar in a 16th-century French portrait. A reader of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* (1969, 1973, 1978, 1981)—which begins with an "Overture," ends with a "Finale," and has repeatedly been labeled by its author as Wagnerian—will have understood that music and mythology run in parallel through all four volumes (chapter 7). Wiseman studies his author as an art critic (chapter 5) and he boldly proposes that the anthropological ideas provide insight into avant-garde art (chapter 6). In fact, only he has undertaken to examine the imbrication of aesthetics and Lévi-Straussian anthropology in such detail. Maybe only he knows his work thoroughly enough to dig out little-known interview material, in which the author expresses himself more informally and directly than in his writing. Only Wiseman has baptized *Mythologiques* "an aesthetic creation in its own right" (p. 168).

"Ethno-aesthetics," the word with which the author titles his introduction, points to the Lévi-Straussian topic even a professor of Balzac or Flaubert is obliged to teach. In chapter 1, "The reconciliation," the author says, "Lévi-Strauss is penetrated at once by a strong desire to overcome the fundamental *discontinuity* that separates humanity from the world (nature from culture), thus making the world whole again, and the knowledge that it is an impossible task" (p.

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34). He acknowledges that some readers find Lévi-Strauss's writings difficult but sees them presenting "an eminently *open* body of thought" (p. 45), which he manages to develop and apply to materials the master does not touch (pp. 127-129 for example). He even synthesizes Lévi-Strauss's theory of creation from essays his reader will not have read (p. 180 n.) Before him, members of the master's laboratory, in the Collège de France, were quite able to replicate his methods on materials untreated by their originator, and the American folklorists Henry Glassie and Dell Hymes have developed Lévi-Strauss's ideas in other spheres.

The Savage Mind (1966), perhaps Lévi-Strauss's most-read book, is discussed in chapter 2, which might be a useful guide for students. He summarizes: "the logical structures (schemas) extracted from sensible reality by 'aesthetic intuition' provide the materials with which human beings create the symbolic systems constitutive of culture" (p. 74). The *pensée sauvage* is common property to us all. "[W]hat differentiates so-called 'primitive' modes of thought from 'modern' scientific modes of thought is not the types of mental operations they presuppose, or the methods of observation that they draw on, but *the level at which they approach sensible reality*" (p. 60). The "wild" mode of thought is scientific because it makes "inferences about the properties of things on the basis of their sensible appearance" (p. 62). And for us, art "preserves the evidence...of this archaic mode of thought" (p. 63). Wiseman connects this thesis with the history of aesthetics.

Relatively little of the book takes up material culture. Subsequent chapters define the separation between Lévi-Strauss's work and Saussure's; expand on the connection between structural anthropology and literary history inaugurated in James Boon's *From Symbolism to Structuralism* (1972); and show Lévi-Strauss finding a cognitive function in all of art. In the tradition initiated by Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Tangled Bank* (1962), the author reclassifies *Mythologiques* as a work of imaginative literature, even going so far as to call this work of high modernism "a postmodern literary creation, a collage of citations" (p. 207). Finally, in a searching discussion of the relation between metaphor, myth, and concept, the author decodes Lévi-Strauss's metaphor of a river as representing an opposition between structure and event. Wiseman's astonishingly thorough, sympathetic, and comprehensive study is a most persuasive tribute to the work of anthropology's towering centenarian.

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