

Structuralism and the Capture of the Self.

The method of structuralism derives from the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's overarching claim is that there is no "natural" connection between the sign and the signified, between the speech act (*parole*) and language as a set of conventional rules (*langue*). *La langue*, beyond the literal meaning of language, is any acquired set of rules that regulates the circulation of meaning within a community. Accordingly, language is artificial and not of organic or divine origin; the connection between signifier (sign) and signified (content) is arbitrary meaning that at the root of the system of language there is a difference. (Wilcken 140) This inconsistency at the heart of language has been fundamental for the development of the "linguistic turn" in continental philosophy out of which deconstructionist methods of critique have developed.

The umbrella term of structuralism includes thinkers such as Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Agamben, and Rosalind Krauss. The primary characteristic of this new way of philosophizing is its implicit use of an aesthetic "surface" inasmuch as its deployment is dependent on the visibility of the form/content exchange through *bricolage*, discourse, apparatus, and grid. The content (and the "self") is considered a product of formal operations hence attention to management (economy) is fundamental. Structures of power can generate meaning but content as an *a priori* center of meaning does not exist, content is generated through equivalences and exchanges just like a binary system of ones and zeros can generate a multitude of outcomes.

Structuralism is on the side of things. Like a cat's cradle string game the "structure" of structuralism implies the possibility of morphogenesis within a set of "fixed" constraints, the string can assume a determined set of shapes within the basic structure it occupies. In other words, a structure is determined but also modular; Wilcken talks of Levi-Strauss' "dandelion" experience that marked the beginning of his line of thought: "The dandelion was the result of the play of its own structural properties, calibrated into a unique and instantly recognisable form. Subtle variations, changes at a deep genetic level, could give rise to other forms, the different

species that multiplied through nature.” (114)

Claude Levi-Strauss who was influenced by the artistic methods of Andre’ Breton and Max Ernst, as Wilcken points out: “He was interested in mid-century artistic preoccupations: the subversive power of the subconscious, the importance of myth, irrationality and juxtaposition.” (129) The surrealists introduced formal operations such as automatism, collage, and random association. Michel Foucault, as well, openly claims to have been influenced by the montage-like technique of Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman* where the novel’s traditional substance (plot, character, arch, etc) disappeared. (Wilcken 218)

Levi-Strauss’ main method is that of *bricolage* meaning a mode of interdisciplinary thought; in Patrick Wilcken’s philosophical biography he says: “The central image that Lévi-Strauss used to describe this process was that of the bricoleur –a tinkerer, an improviser working with what was to hand, cobbling together solutions to both practical and aesthetic problems. *La pensée sauvage* –free-flowing thought –was a kind of cognitive *bricolage* that strived for both intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction.” (248)

What he observed in the tribal people of South America is that they rely on a completely different “software” from ours, he calls it *totemism*: “Indigenous peoples were involved in a conceptual game, building metaphysical models out of what they had readily to hand. It was not animals’ individual characteristics that interested the native mind, but the way they contrasted, forming a code whose symbols were drawn from nature.” (Wilcken 245) Levi-Strauss’ ideological point made in *Tristes Tropiques* is that the totemic system and the practice of *bricolage* is more harmonious and less harmful (to both man and nature) than our inherited techno-scientific paradigm that is the main source of the Western *malaise*.

In his study of the Brazilian native tribes, Levi-Strauss sought to show the high level of complexity and creativity in their understanding of the world offering a mirror to his own *logocentric* European society, which seemed to be far less resourceful. In Levi-Strauss’ view there is no Heideggerian *Ursprung* instead there are many authentic symbolic structures that sustain the life of man. It is important to note that the search for structure is not the search of

origin. The only constant is man's striving for order through a mixture of intellect, sense, and symbolism. The symbolic creations can become dominant; in fact, Levi-Strauss implies that man is "entrapped in systems of which he was unconscious." (Wilcken 220) Ultimately, Levi-Strauss' paradoxical search for an alternative order reveals a distrust of his own "natural" community and the metaphysical inheritance it carries.

The underlying structuralist theme is summarized by Foucault's famous essay *What is the Author?* where he denounces the author/artist as a fictional construct that emerges due to the exigencies of the *episteme*. Foucault's *episteme* is a certain historical conglomerate of discourses and practices through which we activate. From the structuralist viewpoint the author is but a conduit for a complex network of *unconscious* social forces, what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls the *historical element* "the positivities (or the apparatuses) act within the relations, mechanisms, and "plays" of power." (6)

Agamben labels the operative network of forces that exceed the direct scope of the individual agency an *apparatus*: "Today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus." (14) The apparatus is a combination of operations that take place semi-automatically, *it clicks*, "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings." (14) Agamben's main point in *What is an Apparatus?* is that the external power in the Orwellian sense is no more, the choice of submission is deliberate as *self-taming* subjects enact their own subjection, perhaps even taking pleasure in this act: "The boundless growth of apparatuses in our time corresponds to the equally extreme proliferation in processes of subjectification." (15)

Foucault introduces this subtle line of thought in his *History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction* [the French title is *The Will to Knowledge*] when he claims that the process of exposure tied to sexual emancipation is indeed a historically determined *dispositif*. Foucault surveys the transformations of sexuality in the style of Nietzsche's genealogical method to figure out how sex has morphed from *praxis* to pure discourse, the "transformation of sex into

discourse.” (36) Something so apparently *good* might hide a darker origin, like Nietzsche’s insight that morality is a *spiritualization* of physical violence enacted through a conglomerate of techniques of power-control. Foucault asks, how did Western society move from an *ars erotica* (sexual technique) of the Greeks and Romans to a modern “speechifying, analyzing, and investigating” of sex? How do we inhabit the bureaucracy of sexuality? (32)

Foucault’s aim is to determine the drive that operates in a society “which speaks verbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say, denounces the powers it exercises, and promises to liberate itself from the very laws that have made it function.” (8) In many ways, the Jordan Peterson *gender pronoun* scandal that has stirred so much controversy on the web is an example of how sexuality, in the strict Foucauldian sense of power-circuit, has become the site of an ideological battleground. The BBC journalist and documentary maker David Fuller has described the Jordan Peterson phenomena as an epistemic shift in Western consciousness.

In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Hegel claims that consciousness reveals itself most powerfully in art. If so, how does the structuralist method apply to the “free” expression of consciousness in art? Rosalind Krauss’ goes against Hegel by contrasting the “discourse of originality” with her own brand of structuralist-materialist deconstruction. Original art is really a *bricolage* as the original is nothing other than a fictional construct engendered by structural operations with the debris of the past: “Every signifier is itself the transparent signified of an already-given decision to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign—from *this* perspective there is no opacity [originality], but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.” (10)

Krauss makes this claim by deconstructing modernists artists’ use of the grid in painting as a new point of origin, a new beginning. Krauss warns us that what seems like an original act of consciousness is a *fiction* produced by the laws of its own historical make-up “a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence.” (157) After making claim she moves further into *institutional critique*: “The theme of originality encompassing as it

does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, historian, and maker of art.” (11) She is relying on Foucault and Agamben’s idea of discourse/apparatus as “anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine.” (Agamben 14) Discourse is a set of power relations that determines *something* as it emerges in the field of visibility.

One can easily see the *capture* of the apparatus in the contemporary “App” economy where the person submits himself to a digital structure, entering the sphere of the tyranny of the *algorithm*. In the illusion of subjective empowerment the subject becomes a function of the growth of the application as “users” multiply, and the extracted personal data becomes an asset that is sold on the market for data. As the users multiply, the app gains power and prominence. In this respect Agamben claims: “If a certain process of subjectification (or, in this case, desubjectification) corresponds to every apparatus, then it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it “in the right way.” Those who continue to promote similar arguments are, for their part, the product of the media apparatus in which they are captured.” (21) The *capture* in the mechanism of the digital apparatus can be understood today as the “hot” creation of digital content by the user that is then processed by the “cold” operations of targeted marketing; there is a feedback loop where the supposed “freedom of expression” of the user becomes that which orients operations of economic exploitation on behalf of the system.

In conclusion, I believe structuralism served its historical purpose; the development of structuralism can be understood with the collapse of the Third Republic and the shattering of the rationalist-humanist, including philosophies of the *elan vital*. This said, I wonder if the fundamental anti-humanist drive of structuralism has become part of what Max Weber calls the disenchantment of the world. With the rise of digitalized life structure has come to the fore. Many of our daily activities are succumbing to a structural-digital mapping; our manifold needs, including such simple tasks as getting a slice of pizza through the *Slice* app or looking for a serious life-partner through the many digital match-makers available.

The app economy is based on the simplification of choice and immediate gratification of

needs, functional or existential as they may be. Perhaps the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Agamben, and Krauss can provide some fundamental tools for critical evaluation of the world that is encroaching on us; at the same time, what are the critical alternatives to the explicit world-structuring, as the process of mapping the human-all-too-human world, once subjectivity and *spirit* have been evacuated? Is structuralism ultimately *deferred* technological compliance?

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