Lévi-Strauss on Art: A Reconsideration

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose une revision de l'hypothèse de Lévi-Strauss
sur la nature du lien entre la structure sociale et la structure de l'art.
La nouvelle hypothèse se lit comme suit: dans une société divisée en
un certain nombre de groupes bien définis et stratifiés, plus le nom-
bre d'individus associés à plus d'un de ces groupes est grand, plus
l'art de cette société sera susceptible de mettre l'accent à la fois sur la
symétrie et l'asymétrie. Cette hypothèse cadre bien avec les données
Caduveo exposées par Lévi-Strauss. L'article expose ensuite un pro-
cédé utilisé en science héraldique européenne qui produit des dessins
presque identiques aux dessins étudiés par Lévi-Strauss. L'examen
des règles différentes utilisées en Angleterre et en France pour trans-
mettre les titres de noblesse conduit l'auteur à prédire que ce procédé
de fabrication de blasons sera plus utilisé en Angleterre qu'en France.

> ...all these rules inevitably remind one of
> the principles of heraldry.
>
> (Lévi-Strauss, 1975: 191)

All that Lévi-Strauss and his co-workers have done in connec-
tion with myth derives from the conceptualization and programme
that was set out in his "The structural study of myth", originally
published in 1955. But the success of this single article in giving rise
to an entire research tradition is to be contrasted with the failure of
another article by Lévi-Strauss — dealing not with myth but with the
visual arts — to give rise to a similar tradition. This second article is
his "Split representation in the art of Asia and America", originally
published in 1945 but later reprinted — like the article on myth — as
a chapter in his *Structural Anthropology* (1963).

For instance, while a great many of the 55 articles in three read-
ers (Hayes and Hayes, 1970; Lane, 1970; Rossi, 1974) on structur-
alism are concerned with Lévi-Strauss' approach to myth, none are
concerned with his approach to art. Those books which purport to
give a comprehensive overview of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism either
ignore his approach to art entirely (as in Leach, 1973; 1976) or con-
sider the subject only in passing (as in Gardner, 1972: 130-131). Even
when Lévi-Strauss himself now talks about art (as in 1976: 276-283),
he seems to have moved away from the detailed analysis of particular
designs in particular cultures and towards philosophical reflections
upon the nature of art in general.

Since both of his seminal articles (on art and myth, respectively)
were equally accessible (as both were reprinted in *Structural Anthro-
pology*) it is tempting to conclude that his structuralist approach to
art has not generated a research tradition simply because structur-
alism is not as amenable to the study of art as it is to the study of
myth. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that structuralism can
provide insight into the visual arts, although the particular analysis
developed by Lévi-Strauss is flawed and not easily applied to other
cases. It is this second possibility that will be investigated here.

LÉVI-STRAUSS ON ART

In his original article (1963), Lévi-Strauss was concerned with a
type of artistic style that (he argued) was found in several different
cultures, including the Caduveo of South America, ancient China,
various Indian cultures of the Pacific Northwest, and the Maori of
New Zealand. He later (1973: 178-197) expanded and to a large
extent reformulated his analysis through an indepth consideration of
Caduveo art alone, and it is this later analysis that will serve as our
starting point.

Considering a sample of Caduveo facial designs that he had
gathering during his field researches in the 1930's, Lévi-Strauss points
out that if such designs are divided into quadrants, then the designs
in diagonally-opposed quadrants (that is, in the upper right and
lower left or the lower right and upper left quadrants) are more or less
identical, though inverted (that is, they are upside-down with respect
to one another). Designs in adjacent quadrants, however, are quite
dissimiliar. (Several examples of these designs are reproduced in each
of the already-cited articles on art by Lévi-Strauss.)

He summarizes the underlying structure of such designs by saying that they express an opposition between *symmetry* (because diagonally-opposed quadrants contain the same design) and *asymmetry* (because the designs in adjacent quadrants are so diferent).

To this point Lévi-Strauss has done in connection with Caduveo art what he always does in connection with the study of an individual myth, in the sense that he has described "structure" in terms of a set of underlying contrasts. But the delineation of such underlying contrasts is a less interesting part of Lévi-Strauss' work than what he does next. In the case of myth what he does next is either to show how each of the oppositions that define a myth are mediated by the introduction of a third element or to show how the structure of one myth can be transformed into the structure of another myth. What he "does next" in the case of Caduveo art is something different: he tries to show that the structure underlying Caduveo paintings is produced by a particular form of social organization.

The modern Caduveo are the remnants of a culture called the Mbaya, and the Mbaya believed themselves to be a type of nobility who had the legitimate right to exploit the members of surrounding cultures. The charter myth that Lévi-Strauss gathered from the Caduveo relates that the Supreme Being created men by drawing each tribe from a hole in the earth and then allocating to each certain activities. Initially the Mbaya had been overlooked at the botton of the hole, and since everything else had been allocated to others, they were given the only remaining function, which was the right to oppress and exploit everyone else.

After then noting that the Mbaya were divided into three hereditary castes, Lévi-Strauss introduces an element that has absolutely nothing to do with Mbayan ethnography:

> The danger present in a society of this type was therefore segregation. Either by choice or necessity, each caste tended to shut itself in upon itself, thus impairing the cohesion of the social body as a whole. (1973: 195)

Those familiar with the entire corpus of Lévi-Strauss' work will recognize in this passage an echo of the argument that he develops at great length in his massive study of kinship (rf. Lévi-Strauss, 1969). A central premise of that book is that there exists a tendency on the part of unilineal kin groups to close in upon themselves and that this process has to be countered by some social process that would knit

all such groups into a cohesive whole. For Lévi-Strauss, that process is activated by an exogamy rule, as this forces the exchange of women among the various kin groups in a society and thereby fosters societal integration.

In any case, what he concludes from all this in the case of the Mbaya is that Mbayan social structure exhibited a strain towards hierarchy (as the castes tended to be both segregated and stratified) *and* a strain towards reciprocity (as there was a need for some sort of exchange that would bind the castes together). It is his hypothesis that the opposition between symmetry and asymmetry in Caduveo designs reflects this opposition between hierarchy and reciprocity in their social structure.

Unfortunately (for this hypothesis), there is no ethnographic basis for asserting that a "strain towards reciprocity" existed (or exists) among the Mbaya. The only ethnographic evidence that Lévi-Strauss does cite in support of his argument is drawn from two other South American cultures, the Guana and the Bororo. Like the Mbaya, these two cultures had castes that were both hereditary and stratified. But unlike the Mbaya, each of these two cultures overlaid this hierarchial ("asymmetric") structure with a reciprocal ("symmetric") structure: both the Guana and the Bororo are subdivided into moieties that cut across caste boundaries, and the members of one moiety had to choose their spouse from the other.

The fact remains, however, that such a moiety structure *was* lacking among the Mbaya, and that Lévi-Strauss is therefore attributing a strain towards reciprocity among the Mbaya not in light of the ethnographic evidence but rather in spite of it.

Incidentally, since he does document an opposition between hierarchy and reciprocity in the case of Guana and Bororo social structure, his argument would suggest that these cultures — like the Caduveo — should be characterized by artistic styles that involve an opposition between symmetry and asymmetry. Although Lévi-Strauss is quite knowledgeable about both cultures, he presents no evidence which suggests that this is the case.

A REVISED HYPOTHESIS

Breaking down Lévi-Strauss' argument into its component parts produces two separate propositions:

(1) Social hierarchy tends to increase the use of asymmetry in art, and

(2) social reciprocity tends to increase the use of symmetry in art.

Is there any evidence in support of either proposition? Yes, and it is provided in Fischer's (1961) study of art in pre-industrial societies.

Using a sample of 28 societies, which had previously been coded for the presence / absence of stratification and for the degree of symmetry / asymmetry used in a society's art, Fischer found a statistically significant association between the *presence* of a stratification system and an emphasis upon *asymmetry* in art. This is obviously supportive of the first proposition listed above. But the second proposition does not fare as well. The reverse of the result just reported indicates that an emphasis upon symmetry is associated with the absence of a system of stratification, which is *not* the same thing as saying that such symmetry is associated with social reciprocity between clearly defined social groups.

In short, the second proposition is not supported by Lévi-Strauss' own data, and the Fischer investigation clearly associates the use of symmetry with something (the absence of stratification) besides social reciprocity. Given all this, a revision of the original Lévi-Strauss argument seems in order.

Assume for the moment that the presence of clearly defined and stratified social groups does give rise to the use of asymmetry in art and that the absence of such groups does give rise to the use of symmetry (as is suggested by the Fischer results). In what type of society should we then find designs — like the Caduveo body designs — that express simultaneously principles of asymmetry and symmetry? I would like to suggest that *such designs are most likely to be found in societies whose members cannot clearly define their society as being stratified or not.*

In a purely technical sense, of course, the presence of a system of stratification would seem to be easily determined: if a society is composed of several social groups, if these groups are markedly different with respect to values, lifestyles, economic interests, etc, and if there is consensus in the society that these groups can be ranked in a linear order reflecting differential evaluation, then the society possess a stratification system; otherwise it does not.

But "stratification" refers to the ranking of different social groups, not to the ranking of individuals. What happens in the case of a society that consists of *groups* that are clearly stratified according to the definition just given, but which nevertheless posesses a relatively large number of *individuals* who are associated with more than one of these groups? Borrowing from the work by Douglas (1966; 1975) and Leach (1976) on primitive classification, I would like to suggest the following answer: the existence of a class of objects (in this case, persons) which are associated with more than one category in a classification scheme (in this case, with more than one ranked group) serves to blur the distinctions between the categories in the scheme (which in this case means blurring the distinctions between the various groups in the stratification system). But if the distinctions between the ranked groups in a society are blurred, then the very existence of "stratification" is thrown into doubt (as, by definition, "stratification" involves the ranking of clearly *distinct* social groups).

Whatever the merits of the argument developed to this point, it is clear that the following hypothesis follows as a strictly logical consequence of that argument:

> Given that the members of a society agree upon some set of criteria (based upon divergent values, lifestyles, economic interests or whatever) for establishing a set of rank-ordered social groups, then the greater the relative number of individuals associated with more than one of these groups, the more likely is that society to simultaneously emphasize BOTH symmetry AND asymmetry in their art.

Since Lévi-Strauss' explanation of his Caduveo designs was taken to task because it did not fit the facts of Caduveo ethnography it seems reasonable to ask if this alternative hypothesis can account for the Caduveo case.

Remember that the Mbaya saw themselves as a "noble" class with a divine sanction to exploit the "commoners" in surrounding cultures. But membership in this nobility was not entirely ascribed. Lévi-Strauss (1973: 122) reports that due to high rates of infanticide ans abortion, the Mbaya found it necessary to maintain their numbers by adopting children that had been captured in raids on surroundings cultures. The number of such adoptions appear to have been relatively large: he (1973: 182) cites one 19th century source which suggests that in a particular Mbayan community less than 10%

of the population belonged to the original stock. These adopted children were thus associated with both of the two major social groups within Mbayan cosmology, that is, they were associated with the "commoner" group into which they were born and the "noble" group into which they were adopted. It is therefore perfectly consistent with the hypothesis just presented to find that Mbayan art exhibits a simultaneous emphasis upon both symmetry and asymmetry.

But because I have developed my analysis with the Mbayan case clearly in mind, the fact that this case is consistent with the hypothesis that comes out of this analysis is probably not all that convincing. Data from an entirely different source seem called for.

EUROPEAN HERALDRY

Actually, Lévi-Strauss (1973: 191) suggests where such data might be found:

> Finally, the pattern often obeys a twofold principle of simultaneous symmetry and asymmetry, and this produces contrasting registers which — to use heraldic terms — are seldom parted or couped but more often parted per bend or parted per bend sinister, or even quartered or gyronny. I am using these terms deliberately, for all these rules inevitably remind one of the principles of heraldry....

> Finally, the complex patterns obtained by this method are themselves redivided and juxtaposed by means of quartering like those in heraldry.

These passages contain virtually all that Lévi-Strauss has to say about heraldry, and so this section will take up where he leaves off, by considering heraldric designs in greater detail. The first task is to isolate more precisely the subset of heraldic designs which are similar to his Caduveo designs.

The Marshalling of Arms. In Caduveo art, the division of a space into quadrants, and the placing of one design in each of two diagonally-opposed quadrants and a completely different design in the other two diagonally-opposed quadrants can be viewed as a procedure to combining two separate designs into one new and unified design.

In European heraldry[1], the needs to combine two separate designs into one new design occurs most frequently with regard to

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[1] The present discussion is based upon the discussions of European heraldry presented in Fox-Davies (1904), Boutell (1931), Gayre (1961) and Pine (1974).

the merging of one "coat of arms" with another. (NB: "Coat of arms" refers specifically to the design on a heraldic shield; the term "armourial bearings" is typically used to designate both the shield and the various paraphrenalia that surround such shields, such as crests, helmets, supports and mottoes.) Such a merging (technically called a "marshalling") of arms is occasioned by three events.

The first occurs when an armigerous (arms-bearing) male marries an heiress (a woman who has the right to bear arms and to transmit these to her descendants). In this case the husband marshalls the arms of his wife with his own by placing a small scale replica of her shield design (called an "escucheon of pretence") directly in the center of his shield.

In the second case, an armigerous male marries a woman from an armigerous family (but who is not herself an heiress). Here the husband marshalls his and his wife's arms by "impalement". Impalement means that a new shield is outlined and then split down the middle. The entire shield design of the husband is then crowded into the righthand side of the new shield and the entire shield design of the wife's family into the lefthand side.

A moment's reflection will indicate that the over-all design produced by using either an escutcheon of pretence or impalement does not in any way resemble the Caduveo designs described by Lévi-Strauss.

But in these two cases, the marshalling is occasioned by marriage, and theuse of the marshalled design is supposed to cease when either party to the marriage dies. The final instance of marshalling is quite different. If an armigerous male marries an heiress, then upon the death of these two their heir has to right marshall the arms of his parents into a new unifed design and to transmit this new design to his own descendants. Of particular importance to us, marshalling in this case is typically achieved by "quartering".

This means that a new shield is divided into quadrants ("quarters") and the father's shield design is placed both in the upper left and the lower right quadrants, while the mother's shield design is placed in the upper right and lower left quadrants. *In other words, in a quartered heraldic shield, the designs in diagonally-opposed quadrants are identical, while those in adjacent quadrants are different — and thus the overall design is similar to the Caduveo designs stud-*

ied by Lévi-Strauss. The only difference is that in the Caduveo case the designs in diagonally-opposed quadrants are inverted with respect to one another, while in a quartered shield they are not so inverted.)

But there would be little point in establishing this similarity between Caduveo designs and quartered heraldic shields unless it could be demonstrated that the same causal process was at work in both cases. What this means is demonstrating that the hypothesis developed earlier, which was consistent with the Caduveo data, is also consistent with data derived from heraldic societies.

To begin with then, I should point out that quartering a shield is a purely voluntary activity. A person who inherits the right to bear arms from both his parents can simply elect to display the arms of one or the other, rather than both together. Methodologically this means that different heraldic societies — at least in principle — could exhibit variation with respect to the use of quartering.

Given all this, the following would seem to be a reasonable adaptation of the general hypothesis developed earlier to the specific case of heraldic societies:

> Within a heraldic society divided into "noble" and "non-noble" classes, the greater the number of individuals associated with *both* of these classes, the greater the use of that particular heraldic procedure — "quartering" — that simultaneously emphasizes both symmetry and asymmetry.

A consideration of structural differences between the nobility in England and that in France provides a basis for constructing a quantitative test of this prediction.

The Nobility in England and France. Social historians (such as Bloch, 1961: 329-332; Anderson, 1971: 58-62; Pine, 1974: 796-797) have noted many differences between the English and the French nobility, but the one that is of particular relevance to the present discussion concerns the procedures used to transmit noble status across generations.

In France, the ennoblement of an individual meant (and means) that that individual, his entire family and all his descendants were thereby ennobled. In England, the case was (and is) quite different: an armigerous male or female usually transmitted the right to bear arms only to his or her eldest son.[2] In other words, in England the ennoblement of an individual conferred noble status only upon that

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[2] A daughter may inherit the right to display arms (1) if she has no brothers, or (2) if all her brothers die, leaving no issue, male or female. If there are several daugh-

individual and his spouse (and *not* upon his entire family) and upon that individual's death this status was generally transmitted to only one other person (and *not* to all his surviving descendants).

The effect of all this was that while the dividing line between "noble" and "non-noble" was relatively clearcut in France, in England it was relatively blurred. Consider for instance all the offspring of an English nobleman who did not inherit noble status. Were they members of the nobility or not? Strictly speaking, the answer is obviously no. Nevertheless these offspring would be associated with the values and the lifestyle of the nobility in a way that those having no hereditary connection with a nobleman could never be. In short, those offspring of a nobleman who did not inherit noble status would be associated with both the "noble" and the "non-noble" classes, and such a category of offspring existed *only* in England.

This observation, coupled with the prediction previously made concerning the use of quartering in heraldic societies, leads us to expect that *the use of quartering should have been more frequent in England than in France.*

In order to test this expectation, a table of random numbers was used to select 100 armourial designs from among the several thousand listed in Fox-Davies' *Armourial Families* (1902) and another 100 such designs from among those listed in Morant's *L'Armorial Français* (1931). These 200 designs were then crosstabulated according to country of origin (England or France) and whether or not they involved the quartering of two separate shield designs. The resulting distribution is presented in Table 1

TABLE 1

Use of quartering to merge two designs, by country of origin, for 200 randomly selected heraldic shields.

Country of Origin	Use of Quartering to Merge Two Designs	
	Yes	No
England	17	83
France	7	93

(chi-square = 4.72, p. = .05)

ters in a given family, and either of these two conditions are met, then all the daughters become joint coheiresses.

As is clear, our expectation *is* borne out, that is, English heraldic shields are more likely than French shields to involve the use of quartering (and the result is statistically significant: chi-square = 4.72, p. = .05).

CONCLUSION

The immediate goals of this article have been (1) to revise Lévi-Strauss original hypothesis linking social structure to the structure of art and (2) to demonstrate that this hypothesis is consistent with the data drawn from two disparate sources, involving Caduveo body designs and European heraldry.

A more general goal has been to demonstrate that structural analysis is as applicable to the study of art as it is to the study of myth. Whether it will revolutionize our approach to art in the way that it has undeniably revolutionalized our approach to myth is of course an open question. But this question will never be answered until structuralists turn their attention to art, and this article is meant to be but one contribution to that effort.

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