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Creative misreading and bricolage writing: a structural appraisal of a poststructuralist debate

Albert Doja*

In Lévi-Strauss's distinction of hot and cold societies, when it comes to the question of the causation of the divergences, the different strands of analysis all point to one specific phenomenon. In non-literate, so-called "primitive", non-civilized or non-industrial societies, interpersonal communication is more proximate and more immediate than in modern societies where, by contrast, relationships between individuals in literally every sphere of modern social life – whether interpersonal, administrative, or political – are intermediate rather than immediate, in as much as they are at least mediated through written documents.

Our relationship with our own past is a similarly indirect and mediated experience, accessed through the written archive and administrative machinery, which undoubtedly vastly extend our contacts but at the same time, unlike a living oral tradition, give those contacts

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some kind of "inauthenticity"[1]. And the extension of the mass media has only added to the catastrophic loss of autonomy experienced by the modern individual. So if society would be defined as a system of communication, then Lévi-Strauss's diagnosis of modern industrial society is that it is characterized by a pathology of communication. More specifically, the modes of technological development and historical consciousness which Lévi-Strauss takes to be responsible for the destructive expansion of Western civilization are impossible without the defining technology of writing[2].

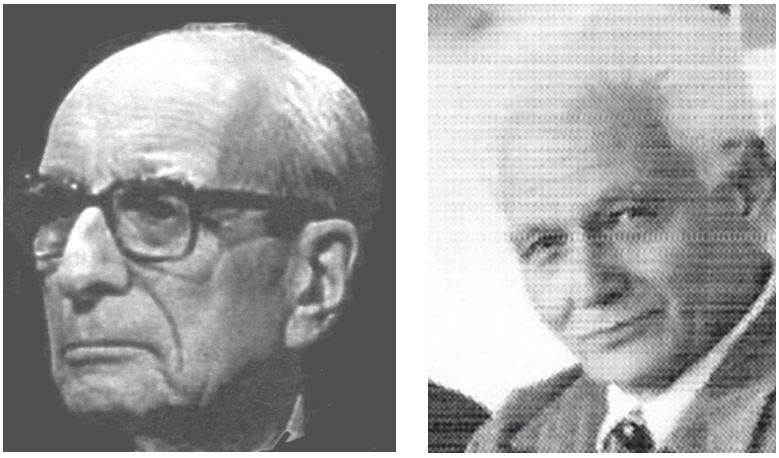
In the celebrated chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* on the 'writing lesson', Lévi-Strauss described the violent irruption of writing in Nambikwara society[3]. When the Nambikwara chief crudely mimicked the act of writing, imitating the ethnographer recording his notes, it was for discovering by the same token its function of subjugation. The 'writing lesson' became then the target of Derrida's 'violence of the letter'[4], that classic reading with a no less classic verbosity, which attached such a great importance to the least alleged disproportion between factual certainties and their interpretive reconsiderations, and claimed to reveal Lévi-Strauss's purported inconsistencies and contradictions, whatever they might be.

Lévi-Strauss's treatment of writing, using the case of Nambikwara mimicry as symptomatic, both enhanced and undermined his case for anthropology as an inclusive science. It enhanced it through showing that the imposition of written language is coincident with hierarchization and other shortcomings of modernity or "hot" society. It subverted it by providing a route for free-floating philo-

1 Claud Lévi-Strauss, 1958, pp. 400-401[366].
2 Claud Lévi-Strauss, 1961, pp. 28-29[26-27].
3 Claud Lévi-Strauss, 1955, pp. 339-345 [296-300].
4 J. Derrida, 1967, pp. 149-234 [101-140].

sophical speculation of the genus post-structuralism and postmodernism that ignores the broader anthropological project. In this respect, in my revisiting of Derrida's now classic reading of Lévi-Strauss on writing, I argued against most post-modern commentators and critics that this influential reading has got it wrong, that it has misrepresented Lévi-Strauss's epistemological enterprise and his humanistic mission[5].

Many of Derrida's arguments on this point do not hold up to a close analysis, and I tried to tease out the inconsistencies and show that Lévi-Strauss's position on this, as on most other things, is far more complicated and nuanced than the version of it that Derrida presented. In this debate Lévi-Strauss has been quite oddly and undeservedly accused variously of being unethical in his fieldwork, of failure to subject his material to analysis, of ethnocentrism, subjectivism, empiricism, truism, archaism, primitivist utopia, epigenetism, sloppy thinking, non-sense, theology and metaphysics – in short, of everything that is at odds with what normally stands as Lévi-Straussian analysis.



Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida

5 Albert Doja, 2006a.

In a central period in anthropological history, when in Lévi-Strauss's hand the mental and the material were granted equal space, there was a strong programmatic claim for an expansive scientific approach, but the rendering of that problematic was restricted as other brands of structuralism came to dominate the centre stage. Eventually, as I showed elsewhere[6], the debate must be situated in its intellectual context of the struggle for the academic division of labour in the 'post-modern cultural condition'. This perhaps marks the beginning of the controversy on Derrida's writing/violence episode, in the absence of the very subject of this controversy, for I believe that making a case, as I did, for the inadequacy of Derrida's argument may also go someway toward recovering Lévi-Strauss from the undeserved intellectual obsolescence he seems to have been consigned to since then.

It is perhaps not surprisingly that the analytical philosophers have considered Derrida to be the high priest of post-modern irrationalism. They were dismissive of his work, in part because they believed that he had abandoned the very notion that language could be related to the world. A spectacular case in point is the fact that Derrida was even opposed the award of an honorary degree by Cambridge University on the grounds that his work consisted of "little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship". For a tradition of philosophy that prides itself on its "clarity and rigour", the values supposed to be at risk to Derrida's "tricks and gimmicks" are so intimately bound up with the referential relation as the essence of language. More importantly perhaps, such a view of language runs the risk of losing sight of humanity and ethics altogether.

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6 Albert Doja, 2006b.

Another indirect clue, at least on the significance of Derrida's challenge to Lévi-Strauss's contribution could be offered by comparing a personal opinion put forward by Carlo Ginzburg. We know the parallels between his study of micro-history and the structural analysis of the past. But the Friulan miller Menocchio, the colourful protagonist of his perhaps most known book *Il formaggio e i vermi* (1976), whom Ginzburg attempted to define as an example of traditional peasant culture, may evoke a number of parallels with the "savage mind" of the people to whom Lévi-Strauss is bound by elective affinity. Now Ginzburg, as he confessed in an interview in 1986, is not interested "in having professional readers", but readers who might read exactly in the way Menocchio read books, even though he is paradoxically perhaps "deeply interested in catching the right meaning of a text". But like Lévi-Strauss, for him too, "that kind of creative misreading is the only way of reading", while he is "deeply against every kind of Derrida trash, that kind of cheap skeptical attitude", which he considered as "one of the cheapest intellectual things going on"[7].

At once, Ginzburg is determined "to understand the right meaning of a text", he gives his benevolent approval to readers such as Menocchio to engage in "creative misreading", and he launches a diatribe against Derrida's "skeptical attitude". How could one reconcile these three contradictory positions? Conventionally, if Menocchio and other non-professional or non-literate readers should be accorded sympathetic encouragement for their creative misreadings or speculative reading bricolages, nothing must distinguish these misreadings and bricolages from Derrida's "tricks and gimmicks". In other words, if we were to look for some grounds on which Ginzburg might explain his own persistent quest for "the right

[7] Quoted in Molho, 2004, pp. 123.

meaning", we could think of Menocchio as if he were a sixteenth-century Derrida or the French philosopher as a twentienth-century incarnation of the Friulan miller.

Yet, Ginzburg's attack on Derrida in 1986 provided no ground for appeal. Interestingly, he had used exactly the same expression "trash" (*spazzatura*) when, two years before, he referred to German racist propaganda in the 1930s. Categorical in rejecting positions Ginzburg has been increasingly anxious to identify those with whom he disagreed and whose ethical behaviour he considered morally equivocal, unacceptable, and even dangerous[8]. One can then guess why he has been so rigidly critical of Jacques Derrida, while cheering on the sixteenth-century Friulan miller, despite or because of his misreadings.

Menocchio is in a sense one of our forerunners, because he is also the dispersed fragment, reaching us by chance, of an obscure shadowy world that can be reconnected to our own history only by an arbitrary act. That culture has been destroyed. To respect its residue of unintelligibility that resists any attempt at analysis does not mean succumbing to the foolish fascination with the exotic and incomprehensible. It is simply taking note of a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims[9].

By contrast, Derrida, who after all is one of our contemporaries, because of his presumed misreadings, is tossed to the heap of cultural trash produced by our culture. There is no more need to point to the moral and conceptual neighbourhood between Ginzburg's and Lévi-Strauss's ethics, even though Lévi-Strauss's reaction to Derrida was symmetrically inversed.

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8 Molho, 2004, p. 143.
9 Ginzburg, 1976, p. XXV.

Simply put, Derrida's distinction between speech and writing is unnecessary, and his opposition of grammatology to logocentrism is but much ado about nothing. Some anthropologists, especially in France, may be ready to dismiss Derrida's discussion of writing as violence, feeling it to be no more than the personal preoccupation of one of the foremost Parisian intellectual dandies. All the fussy logorrhoea is indeed reminiscent of those false celebrities that only the Parisian scene could produce… and export. In the last analysis, this is nothing else than an arrogant scholastics and deliberate misinformation that only ignorance or a certain idea of "self-present" grandeur in academy could allow.

Derrida's *Grammatology* (1967) represented an important attack on the foundations of structural approach, and his "deconstruction", the best-known or most infamous of postmodernist strategies, has been widely used to destabilize anthropological and other assumptions about language, writing and meaning. Derrida's strategy of critical analysis serves to expose underlying metaphysical assumptions, in particular those which appear to contradict the surface argument of the text itself. The term has become synonymous with post-modern theory of various sorts but anthropology has been viewed as an arena particularly appropriate to the postmodernist agenda, especially with regard to unpacking of some of its key terms and concepts such as 'otherness' and 'culture'.

Yet, the "Tristes Tropiques" of post-modernists have located in empiricism and historicism a genuine and well-known problem, mainly by means of a dismissive attitude toward scientific analysis and the largely uncritical appropriation of literary criticism[10]. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Derrida's theories have taken hold

[10] Polier & Roseberry, 1989.

especially in North American departments of literature, while Lévi-Strauss's contribution goes unrecognized, particularly in contemporary North American anthropology.

In many ways Derrida's "deconstruction" became a reading technique so popularized that the word "deconstruction" used to appear routinely in popular magazines and even in big-city newspaper advertisements. Grafted across the Atlantic from a set of European philosophical inquiries onto the terrain of American new criticism, it is starting to look more American than French. It is often perceived even in Europe as an American brand of theorems, a discourse or a school, which has become known as a thoroughly American invention. This, however, does not simply make reference to the fact that deconstruction is an American 'thing', but also to the fact that only in America is this brand of deconstruction understood as a 'thing' at all. In other words, it is not only in America that something like deconstruction is, but America itself is the deconstruction of Europe[11].

As a result, it seems there is currently a total misrecognition of Lévi-Strauss's standing especially in contemporary North American anthropology, where simply speaking he seems to be on the verge of total irrelevance, as few practicing cultural anthropologists see themselves as at all influenced by his approach. At most, Lévi-Strauss is read in the context of the history of anthropology, and there he is usually dismissed, ironically for the very reason he must be praised, namely his insistence on scientific rigour, simply because this concept is become unfortunately quite alien to many American cultural anthropologists. The result of this situation is less a steady critique of Lévi-Strauss than a particularly insouciant neglect. To put it bluntly, in the United States or Britain today, fre-

11 Haverkamp, 1995, p. 28.

quently graduate students of anthropology do not read Lévi-Strauss who is even hardly mentioned in graduate courses, which is tragically short-sighted for the discipline. In addition, and what seems most dramatically critical is that most American anthropologists over the last three decades don't even think Lévi-Strauss is important enough to be argued with. He is simply ignored in the day-to-day practice of a discipline that by and large has embraced post-modernism, especially in the last decades of the last century.

No wonder there are and should be an increasing number of scholars, who have chosen other paths and do the work they do without recourse to Lévi-Strauss at all, in the wake of new developments in anthropology worldwide. But this cannot put at stake his contemporary relevance and his critical importance for the future, nor can this explain the negative trajectory of Lévi-Strauss's reputation, particularly in American cultural anthropology. On the contrary, most anthropologists are rather unhappy with this situation, and Lévi-Strauss's theory is in fact received in anthropology with more discretion and undoubtedly in contrast with the critical reactions that the first texts of structural anthropology caused to a broad range of censors, more at ease to blame their philosophical presuppositions than to judge their impact in a field of knowledge that none really commanded.

Certainly, many anthropologists would now agree that Derrida's deconstructionist project was not one of negating or demolishing structuralism, but more one of pushing structural anthropology to its most radical potential. It might also be argued, of course, that since its inception in the 1960s, the term 'deconstruction' has been so widely used and misused in certain forms of critical theoretical discourse that what is believed to be the force and complexity of Derrida's original formulation might have been

frequently lost. The problem, however, is rather that Derrida's critique often seems to have served as an excuse for many not to read Lévi-Strauss or engage with the highly problematic and subtle nature of his thought on its own terms. 'Post-structuralist' *litterateurs*, meanwhile, have been inspired by this much-read critique, sometimes as an absent referent, which is simply taken as the last word on Lévi-Strauss and structuralism, and simplistically assuming that structural analysis had therefore been superseded. To a certain extent, more often than not this line of criticism seems to be less a matter of bold arguments against Lévi-Strauss's theory than a matter of a dogmatically anti-structural ideological posture, which relies on the received ideas of many 'lit-crits' and 'post-crits' alike derived from the excessive coverage of a very often unfounded critique.

The point here is not to conflate Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss with post-structuralism and postmodernism, which would be an anachronistic misconstruction, to the extent that at least the very terms "poststructuralist" or "postmodernist" were never used by Derrida. No wonder there is nevertheless an increasing dissatisfaction and impatience with what poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism has become in the wake of Derrida. There are many to be annoyed with this situation, and not necessarily among admirers of Lévi-Strauss only. Among many commentators who had written quite extensively on Derrida and deconstruction a perfect example is undoubtedly Christopher Johnson who has used Derrida's reading of the 'scene of writing' and his critique of Lévi-Strauss in a number of articles and a book-length commentary as a working example to explain deconstruction and critical theory. Still, what we are told about the approach and tenor of Derrida's grammatological critique of Lévi-Strauss, which is primarily considered by all accounts

a devastating one, and in which Derrida is supposed to "convincingly expose the logical inconsistencies and conceptual limitations of Lévi-Strauss's argument", is that his deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss's theory of writing, "his patient analysis of its different levels and articulations, of its rhetorical as well as its conceptual framework", in its first and final intention, is not meant simply to singularize Lévi-Strauss as an instance of inconsistency and error nor "to neutralize and dismiss that theory"[12].

Indeed, Christopher Johnson also proved to be subsequently one of the few modern critical theorists to take Lévi-Strauss seriously. In his most recent book on Lévi-Strauss's formative years[13], his acknowledgements finish with a personal tribute to the intellectual inspiration Derrida has given to him, as it was in fact his work on Derrida which made him interested in Lévi-Strauss in the first place. Yet, his attempt was to account for how Lévi-Strauss came to that pivotal position in the 1960s, at the same time questioning, and this is his Derridean inspiration (Johnson, personal communication, 3rd June 2004), some of the central moves in the construction of structural theory and poststructuralist movement. He actually succeeded to masterfully account for the construction of structural theory and in terms of Lévi-Strauss's intellectual universe for the overall theoretical, scientific and humanistic coherence of his 'life-work'. Not surprisingly thereafter, he couldn't take any more side in the debate. He came consciously or unconsciously to relativize his own position as expressed in his earlier work to the extent that one may perceive at least as his relative neutrality on this subject, but which now seems in fact more sympathetic to Lévi-Strauss than to his previous source of inspiration.

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12 Johnson, 1997, p. 23.
13 Johnson, 2003.

I showed elsewhere[14] that Lévi-Strauss always saw himself as working toward a science that could connect mind and the world, using his own formidable generalizing capacity to reduce empirical differences and to reveal the commonalities that he believed lay beneath the jumble of surface reality. Thus, his materialist thrust was simply refocused on "fundamental structures of the human mind", which allowed him to maintain his empirical interests and by the same token spared him the accusations of both idealism and crude materialism. The empirical and analytical experience of structural procedures in anthropology, in any area that can become the subject of philosophical and metaphysical speculation, had the advantage of contributing to a "regressive erosion" of all taught philosophy[15], in such a way as to send the philosophers back to what Nietzsche had already termed their "phantasmagorias". It is ironic that these issues not only explain why he maintained his distance from poststructuralist thought; they also clarify how Lévi-Strauss, whose ambition was to discover a universal theory of mind, in fact at least partially inspired the modern turn toward deconstruction and subjectivity, inadvertently paving the way for contemporary post-modernism, a movement he deeply deplores.

A number of early critiques have already suggested that post-modernism in anthropology does not provide any new theoretical focus in the development of the field[16]. Despite its trappings of political and intellectual radicalism, post-modern anthropology is, in some of its assumptions, a depressingly reactionary endeavour. It may be perceived as a greater threat, with both traditional and critical concerns of the field gradually being dismantled in the name of a position that everybody is

14 Doja, 2005, 2006c.
15 Claud Lévi-Strauss, 1971, p. 570 [638].
16 Sangren, 1988; Polier & Roseberry, 1989; Spencer, 1989.

desperately seeking in the intellectual division of labour of the 'post-modern cultural condition'.

That is why the anthropologist who was once a hero now holds more sway over the humanities than his own field, which, he fears, has descended into internecine warfare. He now considers that anthropologists, for lack of academic project, seek to occupy their time in philosophy, psychoanalysis or literature, "running the risk of letting their discipline lose itself into a magma that, lacking a positive definition, is rather loosely glossed post-structuralism or post-modernism in the apophatic style of theologians"[17]. In response to the new wave and to the "loss of reference marks affecting post-modernist regression in anthropology", he actually has retreated from making any global claims and has distanced himself from the fray. Serene in his faith in the illusion of progress and the limits of human knowledge, he increasingly defines himself as a synthesist, the individual who brings order and coherence to the mass of data generated by fieldwork, the intellectual craftsman struggling to discover patterns in a recalcitrant world of dizzying uncertainty.

Fortunately, it seems more than anything else a clear-deflned theoretical framework by means of a careful combination of Lévi-Straussian structural analysis, cognitive commitments, borderland epistemology and the politics of agency and practice is now providing an instance in which our theoretical understanding of the world can be made to progress, along the overarching revival of the kind of vigorous theoretical debate that tended to disappear from the field in the 1980s. In particular, a critical understanding of the interplay of ideology and culture as political instruments of hegemony and power, which seems particularly good at revealing a new and unsus-

17 Claud Lévi-Strauss, 1998, p. 76.

pected meaning related to unified visions of the integration of knowledge, could be pointing toward some neglected but potentially vigorous developments in current social and anthropological theory that may present not only new empirical material and substantive findings, but also generate novel conceptual and theoretical syntheses to initiate innovative research directions.



Claude Lévi-Strauss's office

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