

7 STRUCTURALIST THEORY AND APPLICATIONS

Semiotics is a form of structuralism, for it argues that we cannot know the world on its own terms, but only through the conceptual and linguistic structures of our culture. Empiricism (see chapter 8) argues exactly the opposite. For the empiricist the work of the researcher is to discover the meanings and patterns that already exist in the world; for the structuralist the task is to uncover the conceptual structures by which various cultures organize their perception and understanding of the world. While structuralism does not deny the existence of an external, universal reality, it does deny the possibility of human beings having access to this reality in an objective, universal, non-culturally-determined manner. Structuralism's enterprise is to discover how people make sense of the world, not what the world *is*. Structuralism, therefore, denies any final or absolute scientific truth—if universal unchanging reality is not accessible to human beings, then we cannot evaluate the truth of statements or beliefs by measuring how closely they approximate to this reality.

This is often a difficult idea to grasp for it contradicts the scientific rationalism that has dominated western thought since the Renaissance. Lévi-Strauss (1979) distinguishes between 'scientific' and 'savage' ways of thinking, not to assert that scientific thinking is better, but that it is different. It works by establishing differences; it divides nature up into ever finer and more precise categories. 'Savage' thinking, on the other hand, is holistic; it attempts to find ways of understanding all of nature, not bits of it. It thus encompasses areas of experience that science rules out as unreal or unscientific, so matters of belief, imagination, and subjective experience do not count as part of its reality. Of course, western science is more instrumental in its power to change the world than the

magical explanations of phenomena in some tribal societies. But a religious 'truth' may be effective in working to change people's attitudes and behaviour; it may affect our social and political systems; and it may offer apparently 'truer' explanations of subjective experiences than empirical science can. Truth is a function of the conceptual and cultural system that makes it and accepts it: it is not a function of a universal, objective, pre-cultural reality.

Lévi-Strauss was a structural anthropologist who extended Saussure's theory of language as a structural system to cover all cultural processes, such as those of cooking, dressing, kinship systems, and especially myths and legends. These are all ways of organizing and therefore making sense of our cultural and social worlds. All cultures make sense of the world, and while the meanings that they make of it may be specific to them, the ways by which they make those meanings are not; they are universal. Meanings are culture-specific, but the ways of making them are universal to all human beings.

Thus, for Saussure, all languages are different: their vocabularies divide the world up into quite different categories; their syntaxes link concepts in quite different ways. But all of them are arbitrary; all of them share the same paradigmatic and syntagmatic structure: all of them, paradigmatically, rely upon a system of categories whose meaning depends on their relationship to other categories in the same system, and all of them have systems of combining categories to make original 'statements'. All languages, therefore, share a structure of differences and combination.

Categorization and binary oppositions

For Lévi-Strauss the paradigmatic dimension of language, that is its system of categories, was the more important. Making conceptual categories within a system was, for him, the essence of sense-making, and at the heart of this process was the structure that he called a *binary opposition*. A binary opposition is a system of two related categories that, in its purest form, comprises the universe. In the perfect binary opposition, everything is either in category A or category B, and by imposing such categories upon the world we are starting to make sense of it. So category A cannot exist on its own, as an essential category, but only in a structured relationship with category B: category A makes sense only because it is not category B. Without category B there could be no boundary to category A and thus no category A. Structurally, the story of the creation in Genesis can be read not as the story of the creation of the world, but

of the creation of cultural categories by which to make sense of it. The dark was divided from the light, the earth from the air. The earth was divided into categories of land and water, and water divided into waters of the sea (infertile) and of the firmament, or rain (fertile). This last shows us an example of the second stage of the sense-making process, when categories that apparently exist in nature, that is categories that correspond very closely to our perception of concrete reality, are used to explain more abstract, more generalized, and more apparently culture-specific concepts, and to ground these explanations in nature and thus to make them appear natural and not cultural. So the opposition of the apparently natural categories of sea water and rain water is used to explain and naturalize the more abstract and culture-specific categories of infertile and fertile. This process of making sense of abstract concepts by metaphorically transposing their structure of differences on to differences of the concrete that appear to be natural is, according to Lévi-Strauss, a common cultural process; he calls it 'the logic of the concrete'. So, later on in the Genesis story, the grasses are divided into leaf-bearing and seed-or grain-bearing, and this distinction is used to help think through the much more problematic distinction between humans and animals: humans eat the grain-bearing grasses and animals eat the leafy ones.

The construction of binary oppositions is, according to Lévi-Strauss, the fundamental, universal sense-making process. It is universal because it is a product of the physical structure of the human brain and is therefore specific to the species and not to any one culture or society. The brain works electrochemically by sending messages between its cells, and the only messages it can send are simple binary ones of ON/OFF. Such is the complexity of the network that the human brain, like its electronic homologue the computer, can construct incredibly sensitive systems of categories by an almost infinite number of refining repetitions of these binary oppositions. (This process has been described in the section on 'bits' of information in chapter 1.) The difference between digital and analogue codes (see chapter 4) is that digital codes are built upon a system of opposed categories.

But nature is not: nature is a series of analogic continua, rather than neat categories. In nature there is no dividing line between light and dark but a continual process of lightening and darkening; there is not even a clear line between land and water—the beach, quicksands, mud are all categories that resist neat binary oppositions. These categories, ones that partake of characteristics of both the binarily opposed ones, Lévi-Strauss calls *anomalous categories*.

Anomalous categories

An anomalous category is one that does not fit the categories of the binary opposition, but straddles them, dirtying the clarity of their boundaries. Anomalous categories draw their characteristics from both of the binarily opposed ones, and consequently they have too much meaning, they are conceptually too powerful. Their excess of meaning which is drawn from both categories and their ability to challenge the basic sense-making structures of a culture means that they have to be controlled—typically by being designated ‘the sacred’ or ‘the taboo’. Anomalous categories derive from two sources—nature and culture. Nature always finally resists the categorization that culture tries to impose upon it. There are always bits of nature that intransigently refuse to fit. Thus, to return to our Genesis example, the snake is neither a beast of the land nor a fish of the sea, but has characteristics of both. Therefore, in a Judaeo-Christian culture, it has too much meaning, it is semiotically too powerful, and thus has to be controlled by being made taboo. Similarly, homosexuality threatens the clarity of the gender categories, and in a society such as ours where gender identity is so crucial, it is surrounded with all sorts of taboos, both moral and legal.

The other type of anomalous category is one constructed by the culture itself to mediate between two opposed categories when the boundary appears too stark, too terrifying. Thus many cultures mediate between gods and people by means of anomalous figures (angels, Jesus Christ) who partake of both. Similarly, there are numerous mythological or religious figures who mediate between humans and animals (werewolves, centaurs, and sphinx) and between the living and the dead (vampires, zombies, ghosts).

Structured repetition

Because the structuring principal is the fundamental way of making sense of our world, structuralism seeks parallel structures that organize apparently quite different parts of our cultural existence in similar ways. Leach (1964), for example, finds parallels in the way we conceptualize our spatial environment, our relationship to animals, and our relationship to people. He traces parallel categories with parallel anomalies between them. Let me simplify his analysis to bring out its main points.

Space is categorized into ‘the house’, ‘the farm or neighbourhood’, and ‘the wilderness’. Animals fit into parallel categories—‘pets’, ‘farm animals’, and ‘wild animals’. People are similarly categorized into ‘family’,

'our tribe/neighbours', and 'the others/aliens'. But these categories, of course, are not always adequate, particularly in the last two cultural areas. So animals that live in the house, but are neither pets nor farm animals, are vermin, taboo, and endowed with excess meaning—rats and mice are especially repulsive to many people. The equivalent category in human relationships is that of step-relatives, who are neither family nor tribe, but have characteristics of both. Leach points out how the stepmother is typically a taboo figure, occupying the category in the human world that in the animal world would be occupied by vermin.

Similarly, between farm and wild animals lies an anomalous category occupied by foxes (in Britain), coyotes (in the US), and dingoes (in Australia). They are wild, but they hang around farms and houses and have some characteristics of domestic animals, particularly dogs. The human equivalent is 'criminals', who are a mixture of characteristics of 'our tribe' and of 'the others/aliens'. Leach again notes how typical it is for foxes, coyotes, and dingoes to be given criminal roles and attributes in folk stories: they are typically thieves and confidence tricksters.

There is also a set of structural parallels between the edibility of the animals and the marriageability of the humans. Pets are not to be eaten, family members cannot be married; farm animals are normally eaten, marriage partners normally come from within the tribe/neighbourhood; wild animals are eaten only on special occasions, and can be killed only by 'licensed' people at 'licensed' times—all societies distinguish between those who may and those who may not hunt, and many have specific hunting seasons. Game (which is a wild edible animal) is an especially festive meal. So, too, marriage between persons from different tribes happens only on special occasions—often to form political alliances—or with great concern for its abnormality, as in inter-racial marriages in our society. Similarly, animals in the anomalous categories are not normally eaten; nor are people in the equivalent categories considered as good marriage partners.

This is another typical example of the logic of the concrete, when the apparently natural categories of space and of animal species are used to naturalize and justify first the more cultural categories of kinship, and second the highly culture-specific and more abstract categories of edibility and marriageability.

Boundary rituals

Structural anthropologists argue that the vital importance of boundaries between categories has produced in all societies a series of boundary

rituals designed to ease the transition between them. In general, the bigger the categories that are being transgressed, the more elaborate and important the ritual. Thus all societies have rituals to give meaning to the passages between living and not living, whether this passage be that of birth or death. Similarly, the passages between single and married, or between childhood and adulthood, typically have elaborate rituals to mark and make sense of the crossing of the categorical boundaries. The much less elaborate and everyday rituals of greetings and departures mark the boundaries between presence and absence.

These passages between categories are often marked by anomalous periods—the honeymoon, the mourning and viewing of the body in the coffin, the period between birth and christening—which are sacred because they are neither one category nor the other: they have traces of the one that has been left and foreshadowings of the one that is to follow. They are periods that help members of the society to adjust their meanings of the altered person so that the transition is not so abrupt as to be disorientating.

Similarly on television, credit and title sequences or station identifications are forms of boundary ritual. They enable the viewer to adjust between the changing categories of, say, quiz shows and the news, or the news and a soap opera. Title sequences typically foreshadow the category of programme that is to follow—title sequences for the various news programmes are quite different in kind from those for soap operas, which differ in their turn from those for action dramas. Without these boundary rituals, television's flow of different programme categories would be more confusing. Similarly, a honeymoon makes it easier for people to adjust to the new categorical status of the married couple. Opening and closing sequences can also be seen as television's equivalent of greeting and leaving rituals.

The importance of marking some of the categorical boundaries on television is recognized in Britain by the requirement that programmes and advertisements must be clearly separated by a blank screen or a symbol. In the US no such requirement exists, and programmes and commercials can easily blur into each other. The confusion of the viewer that results is, of course, to the advantage of the advertiser, who wishes to maintain the 'willing suspension of disbelief' with which a viewer watches a favourite drama programme, and does not want it replaced by the cynicism and distancing that is more appropriate to commercials. The choice of which boundary crossings to mark by rituals and which to ignore can tell us quite a lot about the priorities of a society—in Britain greater priority is given to the viewer/consumer, in the US to the advertiser/producer.

Nature and culture

Lévi-Strauss believed that one of the crucial boundaries that all societies try to make sense of is that between nature and culture. Culture is a sense-making process that makes sense not only of external nature or reality, but also of the social system that it is part of, and of the social identities and daily activities of the people within that system. Our sense of ourselves, of our social relationships, and of 'reality' are all produced by the same cultural processes.

But most cultures do not recognize the continuity between making sense of ourselves and a society and making sense of reality or nature: instead they draw a clear distinction between nature and culture, and try to use the meanings or categories that appear to them to be inherent in nature itself to make sense of more obviously cultural conceptualizations. There is a double, contradictory movement here: cultures differentiate themselves from nature in order to establish their own identity, and then legitimate that identity by comparing it back to nature, and establishing it as 'natural' rather than cultural. Nature, then, is the raw reality that surrounds us; however inaccessible in its own terms, 'the natural' is the sense that a culture makes of nature: the natural is a cultural product, nature is pre-cultural reality.

In his book *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969) Lévi-Strauss analyses the significance of food and cooking as cultural processes, and then extends this so that it acts as a metaphor for a far wider range of cultural transformations. Food is a particularly powerful anomalous category, for it constantly crosses those vital categorical boundaries between nature and culture, between me and not-me, the internal and the external worlds. So moments of key cultural significance are nearly always marked by ceremonial eating, and the cooking process by which raw food is transformed into cooked culture is one of the most important cultural processes. This process starts conceptually before any instrumental transformation, for all cultures divide nature into the 'edible' and the 'non-edible', though all, of course, place different natural objects in each category. The human stomach is capable of digesting almost anything, so the distinction between the edible and the non-edible has no physiological basis, only a cultural one. The significance of this distinction is evidenced by the frequency with which the difference or alienness of another society is identified by its designation of something as edible that we consider inedible. So Frenchmen are known to the English as frog-eaters, and Scots as haggis-eaters; Arabs are aliens because they eat sheep's eyes, and Aborigines because they eat witchetty grubs.

This conceptual transformation of nature into culture (its categorization into the inedible and the edible) becomes the technical process of cooking. All human societies cook their food, though, again, the human stomach is capable of digesting it raw. Cooking is a cultural transformation, not a material necessity. Lévi-Strauss's elaborate analysis of cooking systems is an extreme example of structuralist methodology, and shows some signs of strain (for a good simple account of it see Leach, 1970), but, for our purposes, his most significant distinction is between boiling (or frying) on the one hand, and roasting (or grilling) on the other. He also distinguishes between these as highly cultural ways of transforming food, and the more natural one of rotting. Broadly, he argues that there is an inverse relationship between the degree of cultural transformation and the social value given to the resulting food. So boiled food is highly cooked—it requires both utensils and an agent such as water or oil. It is also 'democratic' in that it increases the amount of food. Roasting, on the other hand, is 'aristocratic'—it wastes food by shrinking it, and it transforms it less because it requires only heat and not mediating utensils and agents. So roast meat is commonly given a high valuation, and is eaten by high-status members of a society, or on high-status occasions. Boiled or stewed meat, conversely, is given a low valuation, is eaten by low-status members of society (especially women, invalids, and children), and is more of an everyday food than a special one. Rotted food has often the highest status of all because it is the least transformed, the most natural; so Stilton cheese and well-hung game are particularly aristocratic tastes in our society.

While we can obviously find exceptions to Lévi-Strauss's account at the level of detail, at the broader level it is useful in explaining a basic cultural transformation, and in drawing attention to the relationship between the degree of transformation and the social status of the resulting product.

The structure of myth

For Lévi-Strauss, a myth is a story that is a specific and local transformation of a deep structure of binarily opposed concepts that are important to the culture within which the myth circulates. The most powerful and significant myths act as anxiety reducers in that they deal with the contradictions inherent in any structure of binary oppositions, and, although they do not resolve them (for such contradictions are often finally irreconcilable), they do provide an imaginative way of living with them, and coping with them so that they do not become too disruptive and do not produce too much cultural anxiety.

Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth owes at least as much to Freud as it does to Saussure. From Saussure he developed his emphasis on the paradigmatic structure of binary oppositions (see below) and his argument that each telling of the myth—which will necessarily differ from other tellings—can be best understood as a form of *parole*, a particular realization of the potential of the deep structure (or *langue*). As the Saussurean linguist studies various *paroles* (which are all there is to study) in order to arrive at the underlying structure of *langue*, so the mythologist studies the various versions of a myth (which are also all that is available for study) in order to arrive at its deep structure.

From Freud he develops the idea that the analysis of myth is the cultural equivalent of the analysis of the dreams of an individual. A dreamer will know that he or she is dreaming, but will know only the dream's (often absurd) surface meaning; its deeper, 'real' meaning is available only to the analyst. So, too, the teller of myth will know only its surface meaning: the 'real' meaning embodied in its deep structure is available only to the analyst. As dreams arise from anxieties and unresolved traumas that have been repressed in the subconscious of the individual, so myths arise from the repressed anxieties and unresolved contradictions hidden in the tribal or cultural 'subconscious. Myth analysis, then, is very similar to dream analysis, though it uses a structuralist methodology because its concern is with culture-specific meanings rather than individual-specific ones.

A simple example will make this clearer. Lévi-Strauss (1979) retells a North American myth in which humans and animals were not clearly differentiated. The villain of the myth was the South Wind, which was so strong and cold as to make normal activities impossible when it was blowing. So the beings (humans and animals) set out to capture it and tame it. The successful hunter was the skate (a large flatfish) who negotiated the wind's release on the condition that it agreed to blow only on alternate days, thus leaving ones when the beings could go about their normal business. This myth is handling the opposition between the benign and hostile sides of nature, but what fascinates Lévi-Strauss is the choice of the skate as hero. He explains it by arguing that alternate absence and presence of the wind is given material form in the skate, for the skate when viewed from the side is almost invisible (absent) but when viewed from above or below is enormous (present). By the 'logic of the concrete', the skate embodies the opposition between hostile and benign nature, the presence and absence of the wind, and thus mediates between them. The structure of the myth can be modelled as in figure 21.

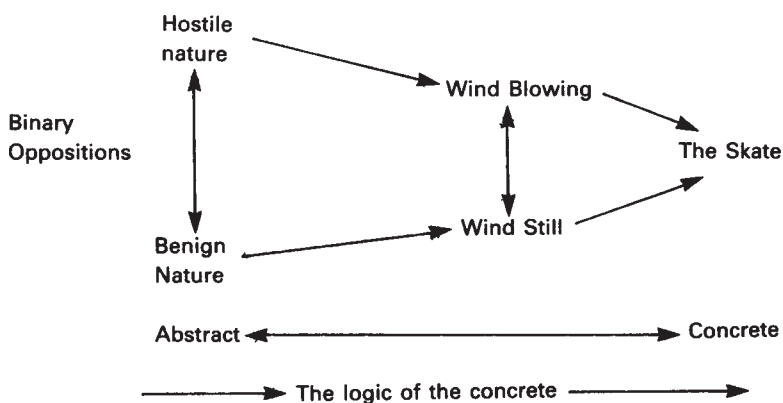


Figure 21

The final meaning of the myth, then, lies not in its narrative or syntagmatic structure, for the events of the expedition and actual hunt are comparatively superficial decorations and do not *need* retelling. The final meaning is to be found in the paradigmatic relationship of opposed concepts which is a conceptual way of structuring and thus of making sense of the real problem. The paradigmatic relation of hostile to benign nature is transposed metaphorically on to the equivalent paradigm of the presence or absence of the wind: the paradigmatic difference is then collapsed into the skate, which contains the difference in a final unity—it is, after all, a single being. Each paradigmatic shift is therefore a metaphoric transposition away from the abstract towards the concrete—the wind is a concrete metaphor for the hostility or benignity of nature, the skate a concrete metaphor for the wind's absence or presence.

The myth analyst, then, uses Saussurean and Freudian methods to arrive at the deep problems that concern a society and the way that myths structure and mediate these problems, and circulate their ways of thinking throughout the society.

The structure of mass culture

In industrial societies, the mass media are often considered to perform a function equivalent to that of myth in tribal, oral ones. So Lévi-Strauss's theories can be applied to the contemporary mass media, in both their fictional and factual modes. Thus all the episodes of a television series may be seen as various *paroles* of its deep structure or *langue*. This may

be extended, too, so that each example of a genre may be seen as a particular realization of the potential of its deep structure. Viewed in this way, all westerns would be specific versions of the same myth of The Western, or, to put it another way, the same deep structure of binarily opposed concepts can generate an infinite number of individual westerns. So, too, the deep structure of a television series can generate an infinite number of episodes, or the deep structure of a tabloid front page can generate an infinite number of possible headlines and pictures. This is an exact parallel to the way that a *langue* can generate an infinite number of *paroles*. Let us apply this in two slightly different ways, by analysing first an individual western, *The Searchers*, and then the cover of a tabloid.

Application 1: 'The Searchers'

The Searchers opens with a shot of an isolated homestead in the barren landscape of the Wild West. Its opening shots are dominated by 'the domestic', the details of everyday life performed largely by women and children. Then, through the open door of the homestead, we are shown a distant figure of a horseman in the landscape. He approaches, dismounts, is met by the family, and we learn that he is Uncle Ethan (played by John Wayne), who has been absent for many years. He is invited in, and joins the family at supper. During the meal another horseman appears in the distance, also seen through the open door of the homestead; he gallops up and dismounts by an Indian rather than a white way, that is by swinging his leg over the horse's neck rather than its rump. He joins the family at the meal, and is met by a hard stare from Ethan, and the comment (which in the 1980s would be unacceptably racist): 'I could mistake you for a half-breed.' We learn that he is Mark, one of whose great-grandparents was a Cherokee.

These first few minutes of the film have set up the structure of binary oppositions that underlie the whole narrative (and the western genre). The rest of the narrative concerns an Indian attack upon the homestead, the kidnapping of the young daughter Lucy, and the subsequent search for her by Ethan and Mark, who eventually rescue her and restore her to her family and a happy marriage. The opening shots emphasize the binary opposition of the homestead and the landscape, which is quickly established as a concrete transformation of the more abstract oppositions between the developed East and the 'raw' West, between whites and Indians, between law-and-order and anarchy, between humanity and cruelty, and, more problematically, between femininity and masculinity, between society and the individual. Finally, of course, the deep structured

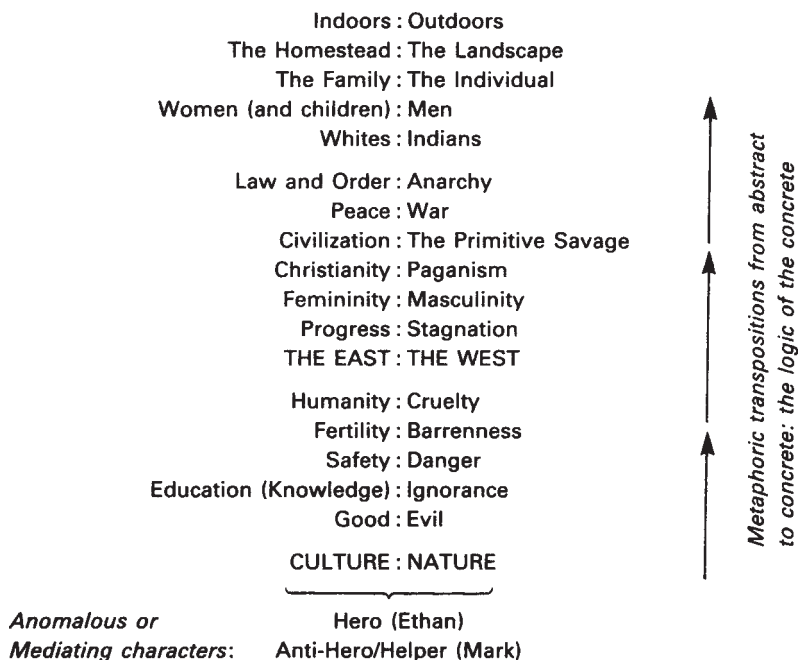


Figure 22

opposition is that between culture and nature. The meanings that derive from this opposition are, of course, ones pertinent to a white, patriarchal, capitalist, imperialistic, expansionist society that sees nature as a raw resource to be colonized and exploited to the full. We may model the structure as in figure 22.

There are a number of points to make about this structural analysis. Although it is primarily derived from the study of one myth only, it depends upon our knowledge of other myths in the genre, if only at the level of cross-checking the categories, for it cannot be valid if it is not capable of generating every other western myth. Of course, each western story need not refer specifically to every binary opposition—the schoolmarm (education:ignorance) is often absent, though the sheriff (law-and-order:anarchy) is almost always present, and the preacher (Christianity:paganism) is frequently included.

I have divided this structure into three main groups of values. The first is of concrete, actual elements in this particular narrative. The second is of the values specific to white patriarchal capitalism which are given concrete form in the first group and which give the elements of that first

group their culture-specific meanings—which, in fact, enable the concrete details to operate mythically, beyond the level of specific instances. This second group can be contained within the meanings of THE EAST and THE WEST (of the US). The third group consists of values which apparently belong to a universal and therefore natural value system, that of the morality of GOOD:EVIL and the way it is manifest in local instances. These are realized in the more culture-specific values of the second group and, in their turn, work to naturalize them, that is to appear to locate them in nature rather than culture. It is, of course, important to realize that this third group of values are finally culture-specific, but they have been given the status of ‘the natural’ and thus can be made to appear to be part of nature rather than culture.

This structure, then, shows how the actual objects and events of a narrative relate to its deep structure in two directions. First, they act as real and therefore unchallengeable examples of more abstract and therefore problematic cultural concepts: they ground the abstract in the concrete, the cultural in the natural. Second, they are themselves given significance by their relationship with the deep structure of abstract and broad cultural categories: they are moved out of the random and into the structured, and thus out of the meaningless and into the meaningful. We know what the objects, people, and events of the narrative *mean* (even if not consciously), and much of our pleasure in the narrative derives from our awareness of the structure (and thus the meaning system) into which they have been inserted. There is, then, a constant two-way movement up and down the structure, between the concrete and the abstract, between the surface and the depth, that is characteristic of all mythic narrative.

But this structure is not without its problems. A culture that wholeheartedly embraced the values of the left-hand side of the diagram and totally denied those of the right would seem sterile and boring, and would, in some way, lack the motivation for development. Thus, to take a simple example, capitalism depends upon risk-taking: it cannot work if people play for safety all the time. Similarly, its competitiveness demands a degree of cruelty, of lack of concern for the loser. In the narrative the Indians are crueller than the whites, but in reality white society, in its racial imperialism, has been far crueller to the Indian than vice versa. The problems with the simplicity of this Structure are most sharply focused around the categories of ‘masculinity’ and ‘the individual’.

The immediate contradictions are that, here, masculinity and the individual appear on the negative side of the structure, whereas in a patriarchal, bourgeois capitalist culture they should appear on the positive

side. But, of course, the values on the negative side of the structure are not unrelievably so, just as those on the other side are not unrelievably positive. The concepts of masculinity and the individual need some of the wildness, the ruthlessness, the amorality of nature: too much civilization, too much of the social, can be debilitating or feminizing. So, while the role of the feminine in the western may be typically that of socializing or taming the masculine, this is never seen as uncontradictorily good or positive. Hence the need for the anomalous western hero, such as those played by John Wayne, who combines many values from each side of the structure. He is an individual who operates on the side of society (but who always rides away as a free loner back into nature as the final credits roll); he comes out of the landscape into the homestead, and returns to nature and the sunset at the end of the narrative. He is at home in nature like the Indian; he is both savage and civilized, both primitive and developed, both 'Indian' and 'white'. The hero is so mythically powerful and narratively successful because he draws his semiotic strength from both sides of the structure. The hero mediates the contradictions between nature and culture: he does not resolve them, for they are finally irreconcilable, but he embodies a way of managing them and of structuring them that is pertinent to a particular society at a particular time. John Wayne mediates these contradictions for the 1950s and 1960s as Clint Eastwood does, quite differently, for the more cynical 1970s and 1980s. The change in the western hero is part of a change in society's meanings of progress, of imperialism, of capitalism, of good and evil.

Application 2: the mythic structure of the 'Weekly World News'

Lévi-Strauss frequently takes apparently unrelated myths from apparently unrelated tribes and demonstrates that the same deep structure underlies them; he concludes, not that myths travel easily and one tribe borrows myths from another, but that common anxieties and problems about the relationship between culture and nature, humans and gods, death and life, us and them, and so on must produce a deeply structured set of binary oppositions which are common, and which therefore generate myths whose differences are merely superficial. It is a theory and a methodology that seeks an organizing unity underneath an apparent diversity.

The cover of the *Weekly World News* (plate 13) is, on first glance, a collection of unrelated stories, but a closer look reveals a deep structure underlying them. The two lead stories allow us to probe into this structure. The scientific proof of the existence of the soul and of life after

How to tell if YOU are descended from a space alien

WEEKLY WORLD

NEWS

November 1, 1998

39907

65¢

**GUN-TOTING MOM
RESCUES NIECE
FROM KIDNAPPER**



Terminal patients were weighed before and after they died!

HUMAN SOUL WEIGHS 1/3,000TH OF AN OUNCE

'This proves there IS life after death,' say top scientists



**Painting of Elvis
weeps real tears!**

Psychic makes river run backwards

**Gutsy girl swims
herself to death!**

**Oops! Cheatin' hubby
tries to date his own
wife at a singles bar!**



death is a structurally similar story to the tears on Elvis's painting: they both share the deep binary opposition of LIFE:DEATH, and the more culture-specific, and therefore less deep, oppositions into which this is transformed. These include those of science:religion, rationality:irrationality, mundane:miraculous, Christianity:paganism, and natural:supernatural. A number of interesting points emerge from this preliminary analysis. The first is that these oppositions are used to question and undermine the socially dominant values, not to support them. In a rationalist but avowedly Christian society such as ours, the relationships between science and religion are necessarily fraught and our society tries to keep the two domains as separate as possible; but when they do come into direct conflict, science is normally given the greater value—for example in the creation-evolution debate, or in the cases of those whose religion forbids blood transfusions or medical treatment. In these stories, however, we are positioned to believe the experiences and explanations which lie beyond science's power to produce the 'true' facts—for 'truth' is, of course, a social construct and its production and circulation is central to the exercise of power in society. Scientific truths may not be 'better' than religious truths, but they do have far greater social acceptability and power.

So 'science' normally refuses to accept the existence of the soul, as it refuses the 'truth' that pictures may cry. These stories contradict the dominant norms; one invites us to side with 'abnormal' science (and Christianity) against normal science, and the other to side with pagan superstition against Christianity. In each story, we take the side of the unofficial or less powerful 'knowledge'. The fact that Christianity changes sides (it is less socially powerful than science, but more powerful than paganism) is unimportant—the structural relationship between the more and less legitimate 'truths' remains the same, and this is what matters to structuralism. Any one unit can change its place in a system according to the other units to which it is related without disturbing the structure of the system. So 'Christianity' can change its position from 'less socially powerful' (in relation to science) to 'more socially powerful' (in relation to paganism). The story of the tears on Elvis's picture opposes Christianity, because Christianity proposes the truth that such 'miracles' are confined to God, Christ, and saintly people—a category that does not normally include pop stars.

The stories of the psychic making the river run backwards and of the (possible) space aliens in our ancestry also share the common structure—the normal versus the abnormal, scientific reason versus the inexplicable. So, too, if less obviously, does that of the 'cheatin' hubby', for here reason and science are embodied in the laws of probability, whereas

coincidence and chance are products of an inexplicable system lying beyond rationality.

The two more everyday stories (the mom rescuing her niece and the girl swimming herself to death) are still concerned with matters of life and death, though at the physical rather than the spiritual level, and with socially dominant norms. Each is seen as abnormal. The gun-toting mom rescuing her niece from a kidnapper inverts the social norms of the masculine and feminine, and of the public (or the official) and the private (or the individual). She is performing functions normally reserved for men and the police; she is doubly disempowered (by being a woman and a private individual) yet succeeds against the social norms. This story questions the social norms by inverting them. The other questions the norms by exceeding them. Sport is officially encouraged because it promotes socially desirable values, so a story in which the norms of 'gutsy' endeavour (in sport or work) are exceeded to the point of death calls them into question. The story tells us that the girl worked too hard for her coach, with an implicit parallel to the worker working (too) hard for her or his boss. Excess always questions the normality of that which is exceeded. This whole front page is excessive, and its excessiveness invites an enjoyable scepticism, so that our disbelief of the 'official' experiences and explanations overflows on to the *Weekly World News* itself—we are as sceptical of these stories as we are of the social norms they are exposing.

This page, then, performs a mythic function for the disaffected and disempowered in contemporary America. The social norms and the values that they carry are embodied in such powerful concepts as science, reason, and the natural, and are challenged by less legitimated values which appeal to the subordinate if only because they offer ways of questioning the social system that disadvantages them. One way of coping with a social system that disadvantages one is by disbelief, a general scepticism in which everything is taken with a grain of salt. The mythic structure underlying the diverse stories on this page then, would look like figure 23.

The political and social import of this structure lies in the relationship of the deep 'universal' oppositions of CULTURE:NATURE and DEATH:LIFE with the more socially and historically specific ones into which they are transformed. This relationship is the reverse of what one might expect, in that the positive concepts of NATURE and LIFE are aligned with the weak and disadvantaged. The social system that disempowers them is shown to be unnatural and inadequate, and the values it disparages are shown to be the more positive and the more 'true' because they are closer to a sense of nature that our society denies in the name of scientific reason.

Science	: Religion
Rationality	: Irrationality
The Explicable	: The Inexplicable
Christianity	: Paganism
The Mundane	: The Miraculous
The Natural	: The Supernatural
The Physical	: The Psychic
Probability	: Coincidence
(over-) Exertion	: (normal) Effort
Masculine	: Feminine
The Public	: The Private
Official	: Individual
The Powerful	: The Weak
Culture/Society	: Nature
Death	: Life

Figure 23

Myth and social values

Analysing the *Weekly World News* in this way pushes Lévi-Strauss's ideas into an area where he never ventured—that of social differences, particularly, but not exclusively, those of class. These are more central to Barthes's theories of myth, though, again, our analysis contradicts Barthes's central definition of myth in capitalist societies, which is that, with very few exceptions, it promotes and serves the interests of the dominant classes.

In most ways Barthes's and Lévi-Strauss's theories of myth are diametrically opposed. For Lévi-Strauss myth is a narrative that is recognized as a myth even if its meanings are not consciously negotiated by the people using it. For Barthes myth is an associated chain of concepts: people may well be conscious of the meanings of this chain, but not of its mythic character. Myth, for Barthes, disguises its very operation and presents its meanings as being natural; for Lévi-Strauss, its operation is open, its meanings are what is hidden.

For Barthes myth is class-based: its meanings are constructed by and for the socially dominant, but they are accepted by the subordinate, even if they go against their interests, because they have been 'naturalized'. Lévi-Strauss sees myth as dealing with anxieties and problems shared by the whole society, and, ultimately, by the human race. His neglect of

class difference may well be explained by his material, which is the myths of tribal societies, whereas Barthes is concerned with those of late-twentieth-century capitalist ones.

Both theorists see myth as a form of language, a way of circulating meanings in society, but their differences appear here as well. Barthes sees language as class-dominated—for him linguistic resources are no more equally distributed than economic resources; and he focuses as much on speech (*parole*) as on language (*langue*)—because he is just as concerned with how language is used as with the abstract potential of its system. Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, is more interested in the systems by which language structures all our thought and meanings. He is more purely Saussurean in his rejection of history and social specificity as more superficial and thus less significant than the non-historical, universal nature of the system itself. Barthes tends to take this for granted, and lays his emphasis on the historical and social uses to which the system is put. Lévi-Strauss grounds his argument on the structure of the human brain, Barthes on the structure of capitalist societies. But neither of them were directly concerned with the politics of gender and racial differences.

The analysis of the *Weekly World News* reveals a myth of the subordinate, and thus extends the theories of both Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. It also shows that subordination is linked to gender as well as class. When we follow up the stories, this link becomes stronger. The coach who pushed the female swimmer to her death was male; it was women who saw Elvis's tears on his picture. Capitalist societies are also patriarchal ones: men benefit from both economic power and gender power. Reading myth is reading social values, but these values do not serve all members of society equally, and thus in patriarchal capitalist societies the mythologist explores the role played by meanings in the distribution of power in society, and that power is both class-based and gender-based.

Structuralism teaches us to look for the deep structures that underlie all cultural and communication systems. It also enables us to demonstrate that the various social and cultural systems that we use to organize and make sense of our lives are not random or disconnected, but are analogous to each other. (The social system of patriarchal capitalism is analogous to the structure of *The Searchers*—and to that of the western genre—as it is to the structure of the *Weekly World News*.) It therefore places communication (that is, the social generation and circulation of meaning) at the centre of any society. Language, myths, and symbolic systems are the focus of structuralists' attention, for they provide unique insights into the way a society organizes itself and the ways its members have of making sense of themselves and of their social experience.

Suggestions for further work

1. Take a Clint Eastwood western and analyse it structurally as *The Searchers* was analysed in this chapter. Which of the pairs of binary oppositions are common to both movies? Have the terms in any of them changed places? Can your comparison of the two structures help to account for the differences between the heroes typically played by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood? Kottak (1982) has a structural comparison of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Star Wars* which you may find useful as a model.
2. Analyse the page from *Seventeen* (plate 16, p. 179) in the way that the page of the *Weekly World News* was analysed here. What does the comparison of the two enable you to deduce about their different readerships and their social situations?
3. Compare Barthes's and Lévi-Strauss's theories of myth. Can the two be combined or are they irreconcilable? Take an example of contemporary culture and apply each theory to an analysis of it; compare your findings.
4. Use structuralist methods to analyse a popular place as a cultural text. Typical places might include the beach, a camp site, a shopping mall or department store, a national monument, a park. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner (1987) and Fiske (1989b) give some helpful examples.

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