

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BORIS WISEMAN, *Lévi-Strauss, Anthropology and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 279 p., index.

Towards the end of *Lévi-Strauss, Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Boris Wiseman explores the ways in which Lévi-Strauss's project in *Mythologiques* (1964-71) is not only an anthropological endeavour, but also, and perhaps more significantly, an aesthetic one. He cites Lévi-Strauss from an interview conducted not long after the publication of the first volume: "My curiosity about myths is born from a deep feeling whose nature, at the moment, I am unable to penetrate. What is a beautiful object? What is an aesthetic emotion? Maybe that is what I am trying to understand through my study of myths, without being clearly aware of the fact" (quoted in Wiseman, 168). Here Lévi-Strauss frames myth as an object of beauty and thus, as Wiseman claims, introduces aesthetics into the study of anthropology. The significance of aesthetics for anthropology and the relation between the two form the basis of Wiseman's argument and discussion. The book's relevance, however, goes beyond its significance for Lévi-Strauss scholarship. Wiseman's analysis raises questions about two key issues for social science research: what constitutes the object of research and, more broadly, what constitutes the project; where do the disciplinary boundaries lie?

For Lévi-Strauss, as Wiseman explains, "the object of research" emerges from his concept of *pensée sauvage*, a concept that foregrounds the act of creation and meaning-making as the focus of inquiry. With this emphasis, Lévi-Strauss locates the social scientist as part of the larger project of the human sciences. Wiseman develops his argument based on these central features of Lévi-Strauss's thought. His goal "is to show that aesthetics are an integral part of Lévi-Strauss's thought; that aesthetics and anthropology intertwine and do so at the most elementary levels of elaboration of Lévi-Strauss theory and interpretations" (3). The aesthetic component emerges from the importance Wiseman places on a theory of the creative act at the centre of *pensée sauvage*. His argument is twofold. First, structural anthropology emerges out of a set of aesthetic questions; secondly, these aesthetic questions raised by anthropological "data" have implications for aesthetic theory and specifically the aesthetics of modern art. Weaving together the various threads of his argument, Wiseman takes readers through an intricate intertextual journey as he moves between passing comments on works of art to well known Lévi-Straussian concepts and then completely outside the anthropological oeuvre to art theory, literary movements and a philosophy of aesthetics. With this approach, he locates Lévi-Strauss as part of an aesthetic tradition of thought, a manoeuvre that invites readers to encounter Lévi-Strauss and his structural anthropology from a unique and intriguing perspective.

To understand the import of Wiseman's project, an aesthetics must be distinguished from an anthropology of art. The latter takes as its focus the social relations around the production, circulation and reception of a work. Lévi-Strauss, however, focuses on questions of individual creation, aesthetic emotion, theories of signification in Western and indigenous art forms as well as art's ontology. These aesthetic issues in turn propel the anthropological inquiry (7). Wiseman considers how these aesthetic issues emerge with a close analysis of *pensée sauvage*, a key Lévi-Straussian concept. *Pensée sauvage* is best understood as a mode of thought defined by its method of engaging with the world. It is grounded in what Lévi-Strauss calls a "logic of sensible qualities" or a "concrete logic" (58), a logic based in an apprehension of the universe through sense perception. The aesthetic link lies in this mode of thought's defining characteristics: a totalising function (these systems of thought allow for parts to be related to a new whole) and an anchoring in the sensible (their logic emerges from an immediate relation to perception) (43). Thus, according to Wiseman, Lévi-Strauss grounds his anthropology in a concept that privileges perception and the creative act, two components also central for aesthetic theory. He develops this claim by reading Lévi-Strauss's anthropological and aesthetic arguments together. He considers the key anthropological works such as *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962 [1966]) and *Mythologiques* (1964-71) but he focuses on the sections and passages where Lévi-Strauss comments on art, literature and aesthetics.

In *La Pensée Sauvage* and *Tristes Tropiques*, for example, Wiseman focuses on passages where Lévi-Strauss references artistic and literary works, passages that appear to be simple asides. In the former, Wiseman considers a section where Lévi-Strauss details his emotional experience while reflecting on a lace ruff in a painting by the seventeenth-century French artist, François Clouet. In *Tristes Tropiques* he considers a series of reflections Lévi-Strauss made in response to a train journey through Brazil, reflections that include references to Rimbaud and more generally, "the poet's game" (111). Key for Wiseman is the resonance these aesthetic "digressions" have with the texts' central anthropological arguments. In the comments on the painting, Lévi-Strauss proposes a theory of art based on a process of simplification, a theory that foreshadows the key features of *pensée sauvage*'s classificatory systems, the text's intended focus. The correspondences the poet finds between sounds and colours or scents are invoked by Lévi-Strauss as he reflects on what he sees as an unconscious logic organizing the new towns built along the railway. The organization is not random, nor is it irrational, but lies instead in the logic of the sensible, a logic he links to the poet. The above examples offer some sense of Wiseman's method and analysis in his reading of Lévi-Strauss. His purpose is to show how these passing aesthetic comments are not separate from the anthropological study, but rather form an important part of the structuralist project.

In this way, Wiseman paints a portrait of an anthropologist deeply embedded in aesthetic thought. The anthropological perspective is not irrelevant but forms only one part of Lévi-Strauss's research and ideas. For Wiseman, this anthropo-aesthetic relation is most obvious in the four volume *Mythologiques*. He claims this highly influential text is misunderstood because of readers' failure to recognize the aesthetic components. Whereas other anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, approach myths as a source of information about ritual

and religion, Wiseman argues that for Lévi-Strauss myths are also aesthetic objects. Thus, *Mythologiques* needs to be read as a treatise on aesthetics, a claim Wiseman develops by emphasizing the importance of the creative act for Lévi-Strauss's approach. The study of myth involves the study of how mythical thought emerges. The focus of analysis is the act of creation, an act Lévi-Strauss argues emerges from a creative logic, a spontaneous and disinterested working of the mind (170).

By locating aesthetics as important to Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, Wiseman can also argue that Lévi-Strauss has something to offer to aesthetic theory. He weaves this secondary claim throughout the analysis: a reading of Lévi-Strauss's study on Caduveo body painting shifts to a reflection on ready-made modern art; his thoughts on the symbolism of the bow and arrow for the Osage Indians evokes for Wiseman the aesthetics of the Happening or the work of Mondrian; and, the mythical image of the skate from the Salish is linked with Lévi-Strauss's essay "A Small Mythico-Literary Puzzle" (1987), a text about a poem by Apollinaire. The link is again most evident in Lévi-Strauss's work on myth. Wiseman discusses at great length the ways in which Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth is employed in analyses of art, as for example, his various discussions of Wagner's *Parsifal*. These ideas on myth double as a theory of creation, a theory that has meaning for art and aesthetic theory. The connection rests again on *pensée sauvage*; art and myth share a grounding in sensory perception and both enact a totalizing function. Myth (as well as ritual and totemism) mediates the subject's relation to the world and enables "human beings to apprehend the world as a complex whole whose many parts (and problems) are all interrelated – in 'correspondance' with one another" (43). In Wiseman's analysis, art operates under similar terms. Art, like myth, produces meaning; its aesthetic signs are not referential but creative.

The critique of art theory that privileges the question of what art means, in other words, art understood as an object that points to something out there in the world, is not new. Arguably, this line of thinking was a central feature of several decades of poststructuralist thought, something Wiseman fails to address in any detail. What is unique, however, is that Wiseman locates the basis of this critique in the work of Lévi-Strauss. In doing so, he opens up a body of thought that risks being locked in as part of a fixed historical lineage. To some extent, Wiseman re-writes the story of structuralism by paying attention to parts of Lévi-Strauss's work that remain underacknowledged, if at all. He thus also reanimates the import and significance of this central figure for both anthropology and sociology.

In Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, anthropology shares the page with key movements in modern art and Lévi-Strauss's ideas are put in relation with the work and thoughts of such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamps; and poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Paul Valéry. Wiseman thus creates a dialogue between Lévi-Strauss, artists, poets and aesthetic thinkers and in this way makes apparent the link between anthropology and aesthetics. The book is built as an assemblage, a mode of analysis Wiseman links to another component of *pensée sauvage*, the mytho-poetic, a concept that refers to a totalising practice

as well as a boundary-marking function. In other words, the mytho-poetic enacts the theory of human-world relation in which *pensée sauvage* is grounded.

This method of reading and analysis, a method Wiseman names as central for Lévi-Strauss, is one of the book's strongest features. By bringing together science and aesthetics, the scientist and the artist, the anthropological object and the work of art, Wiseman troubles the boundaries that separate each pair and reveals instead what it is they share. Wiseman thus invites the reader to think about social science in much broader terms, terms that include aesthetic issues. In a sense, there is a kind of debt owed to this "other" way of understanding the social world. As Lévi-Strauss writes in the passage Wiseman discusses from *Tristes Tropiques*, "the work of the painter, the poet, and the composer and the myths and symbols of primitive Man [should] seem to us: if not a superior form of knowledge, at any rate as the most fundamental form of knowledge, and the only one we all have in common; knowledge in the scientific sense is merely the sharpened edge of this other knowledge" (quoted in Wiseman, 111). This sentiment captures Wiseman's central claim: the beautiful object has something to say to the social scientist. But more importantly, it speaks to the relevance of this claim. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropology and Aesthetics* without a doubt will be important for the student of Lévi-Strauss. But more than this, it brings attention to the relation between scientific knowledge and what Lévi-Strauss calls *pensée sauvage*, a relation that resonates beyond the particulars of his work.

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