



PRIFYSGOL CYMRU
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
Trinity Saint David

Some thoughts on Myth

Nick Campion

Claude Lévi-Strauss 1908-2009



- Pioneer of Structuralism.
- Influenced by (and influence on) literary structuralism but dismissed it when it was non-comparative.
- Keen socialist in youth. Hence:
- Believed that all people are cognitively the same in all cultures: therefore there is no difference between the 'savage' mind and the 'civilised' mind.
- He opposed (a) Existentialism and (b) Phenomenology, which then attempted to find the structure of consciousness. He argued that the world we see is the real world.
- The meaning of a thing cannot be ascertained except through comparison with other things
- Therefore he studied kinship systems – the study of relationships
- Relationships often appear to be chaotic, random, irrational. For example, why does one person fall in love with another?



- Lévi-Strauss assumed that all apparently chaotic systems are underpinned by rules.
- These rules apply when we select partners, tell stories, create myths, and enact rituals.
- These rules are universal.
- Origins: the transition from animal/nature to human/culture saw the institutionalisation of the first social rule, the incest taboo. The result was that men and woman had to secure partners from outside their immediate kinship group. This required means of interacting cooperatively with other groups.
- Myths reveal the way in which people think about themselves and society.
- Each myth is countered by another myth with an alternate or opposite conclusion: they both contradict each other and contain mediating elements. There is therefore no such thing as an original or authentic myth. All are constrained by language.
- The result has been described as a 'hall of mirrors'.
- But all myths are dictated by the same logic and same rules.



- Therefore if take all myths from the Americas we can discover the single philosophy of native American life.
- We can then take all world myths and discover the universal way of thinking which is imprinted on the human brain.
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The following is a classic representation of associations in American myths in which the raven/coyote is a trickster figure mediating between two modes of activity/existence



Life

Agriculture

Herbivores

Raven; coyote

Beasts of prey

Hunting

Death



- In Structuralist terms sky myths are universal myths localised to a particular medium – the sky.
- How would we then approach, say the problem of the classic western sky myth tradition inherited from the Greek classics?
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- For example, what is the role of the Sun. He is male, and appears as both Father ('the Father of all' in the Hermetic texts) and son (Horus, Christ)?
- As make, is he expressive of a patriarchal figure who also appears as Zeus/Jupiter, but is a much more colourful mythic character?
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- **Major works**
- *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1949, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. Rodney Needham, trans. J. H. Bell, J. R. von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham, 1969)
- *Anthropologie structurale* (1958, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, 1963)
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- [*La Pensée sauvage*](#) (1962, *The Savage Mind*, 1966)
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- [*Mythologiques 4*](#) Vols (trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman)
- *Le Cru et le cuit* (1964, [*The Raw and the Cooked*](#), 1969)*****
- *Du miel aux cendres* (1966, [*From Honey to Ashes*](#), 1973)
- *L'Origine des manières de table* (1968, [*The Origin of Table Manners*](#), 1978)
- *L'Homme nu* (1971, [*The Naked Man*](#), 1981)
- [*Anthropologie structurale deux*](#) (1973, *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. II, trans. Monique Layton, 1976)
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- **Critiques of Lévi-Strauss**
- Empirical British anthropologists say he got all his details wrong (counter-argument: this doesn't affect his theory)
- Pierre Bourdieu: he focused on the way people thought at the expense of the daily details of the way people lived (counter-argument: this doesn't affect his theory)
- Too influenced by the myth of the Noble Savage (Rousseau)
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