Lévi-Strauss, Caduveo Body
Painting and the Readymade: Thinking Borderlines

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The aim of this article is to explore some convergences between aesthetics and the anthropology of art, two disciplines often thought of as incompatible or mutually exclusive. Its impetus is the conviction that we have much to gain by a more systematic and concerted attempt at constituting an ethno-aesthetics, i.e. a decentred aesthetics enriched by the dynamic of cross-cultural comparison. I will take as my starting point Lévi-Strauss’s classic studies of Caduveo body painting and try to show how, beyond the clichés often repeated about structuralism, they provide valuable insights for an understanding of various forms of avant-garde art, from Duchamp’s readymades, to Anthony Caro’s abstract sculptures and assemblages by the Nouveau Réaliste artist Arman. Although these forms of art would no doubt constitute, for Lévi-Strauss, instances of what he calls, pejoratively, an ‘academism of the signifier’, I will argue here that Lévi-Strauss’s own theorisation of the relations between nature, culture and art enables us to see them, in at least one of their dimensions, as prime examples of the fulfilling of the mytho-poetic function. What I will place, here, at the core of the mytho-poetic function, following a view that is implicit in Lévi-Strauss’s works but not articulated as such, is a boundary marking process, one that is central to the way in which we create an order of the world around us.

Lévi-Strauss first came across Caduveo body painting in 1935-1936, during his first ethnographic field trip. A series of photographs taken by him preserve a visual record of this evanescent art form. One of them is of a child, maybe four or five years old, with a shock of untidy hair. He is smiling for the camera. A line splits his face in two from top to bottom. A series of volutes adorn his chin. Other lines, wind across the surface of his skin like paths across a landscape, one of them bisecting the left eye, another twisting down from the right-hand side of the forehead to the left-hand cheek. Another photograph is of a melancholy looking middle-aged woman, whose face is covered by a denser network of arabesques. She seems to be peering out from behind a complicated ornamental screen.

Caduveo body painting is a traditional art form that has remained largely unchanged since the 18th century. It is practiced mainly by women on women, although in the past men also painted their bodies. There is some indication that the paintings were once tattoos. Lévi Strauss interprets the fact that the Caduveo designs are today less permanent as a sign of the decrepitude of Caduveo society in general.
What Lévi-Strauss first notices is the erotic purpose this art form sometimes has, one that he associates with the way in which the designs seem to sadistically cut up or distort the human form. As he writes: ‘The delicate and subtle traceries, as sensitive as the lines of the face, but which sometimes accent them and sometimes falsify them, enhance them and at the same time contradict them, give to the feminine countenance something deliciously stimulating’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1942, p. 35).

Lévi-Strauss’s three attempts at interpreting this art form – ‘Indian Cosmetics’ (1942), ‘Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America’ (1944-5) and ‘A Native Society and its Style’ (1955; Chapter XX of Tristes Tropiques) – bring out its multi-layered, overdetermined nature. The first essay is mainly descriptive and need not be discussed here in detail. In the second essay, he relates the Caduveo facial designs – or at least a particular recurring type of design (the designs on the boy’s face in the above photograph don’t conform to this template) – to a highly stylised form of representation known as ‘split representation’, practised, it would seem, by the Indians of the North West coast of North America (18th to 19th century), populations from Ancient China (1st to the 2nd millennium B.C.), and the Maori from New Zealand (14th to 18th century). In each of these places one encounters the same distinctive mode of representation, in which animals or human figures are split and reorganised to form a new whole. This splitting takes in particular one characteristic form: the representation of the front view of an animal (usually the head) by two joined profiles. This is illustrated very well by the Tsimshian design called ‘bears meeting’, analysed by Franz Boas in his seminal book Primitive Art (reproduced in Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, p. 249; 1958, p. 275). The functionalist interpretation, put forward by Franz Boas, was that split representation arose as a result of the transposition to flat surfaces of methods of representation developed for the decoration of three-dimensional objects (one way of representing an animal on a box is to dislocate it so that each side of the box presents a different view of the animal).
Lévi-Strauss’s thought provoking proposal is that in Caduveo facial painting, it is the human face itself that is ‘split’ and re-assembled as two profiles by the designs painted onto it. His evidence is first of all formal. The three Caduveo essays taken as a whole may be read as an extended meditation on the uses of asymmetry. In Caduveo art, the human face is divided according to two apparently conflicting sets of principles. The patterns are distributed, on the one hand, in relationship to a vertical and horizontal axis, which divides the face into four symmetrical quarters. In addition to this, an oblique axis also cuts across the face from the top left-hand side to the bottom right-hand side (it should be noted that not all designs follow this pattern which is presented as a basic type). This introduces a kind of chiastic twist into an otherwise symmetrical pattern, a twist that is put forward as the formal means by which the designs dislocate the human face that supports them. The end product is a tension between symmetry and asymmetry, which is presented as a key to the distinctive style of Caduveo art. It is what makes it stylistically so different from, say, Maori facial designs (see the drawing by a 19th c. Maori chief on this page), which do not exploit asymmetry in the same way. As Lévi-Strauss observes, the result is something that has few parallels, except perhaps in the designs placed on playing cards.

A curious episode that occurred during the 1935-6 field trip seemed to confirm this interpretation. A Caduveo woman was asked to draw one of her designs on a sheet of paper. She began by tracing the outline of a face. Intriguingly, she represented it with a deep declivity in the middle of the forehead. Lévi-Strauss saw this as evidence that this Caduveo painter conceived of the human face as made up of two joined profiles.
The intuition at the heart of Lévi-Strauss's explanation is that the designs aren't simply placed on the face but rather entertain a complicated interrelation with it. It is this feature that provides the basis for his sociological explanation of the meaning of these designs. On the one hand the designs and the face are opposed in the sense that the designs modify the structure of the face and distort it in a quasi-sadistic manner. On the other it is only by being painted that, according to Caduveo belief, the face acquires its specifically human dignity and spiritual significance (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, p. 261; 1958, p. 288). Lévi-Strauss narrates an anecdote told by the 18th century Jesuit missionary Sanchez Labrador. When asked why they painted themselves, the Caduveo are alleged to have replied that unpainted human beings are 'stupid', indistinguishable from mere animals (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, pp. 257-258; 1958, p. 283). As Lévi-Strauss shows very well, the designs 'make' the face, which the Caduveo believe is predestined to receive them: unpainted, human beings are incomplete. For, the designs are interpreted in indigenous culture as the imprint on the human body of a supernatural order, which constitutes something like a template for the order that exists in the here and now. The designs, in short, are the expression of a theory of personhood, one that Lévi-Strauss explains by resorting to the metaphor of the duality of the actor and his (or her) role (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, pp. 261-262; 1958, p. 288). In one sense, the role is made for the actor who takes it on in the way that one might wear a mask. But on the other, it is only through his or her role that the actor exists, just as the designs painted onto the face of the Caduveo women 'make' the face. The sociological equivalent of the actor's role is a human being's social identity (the designs literally identify rank, clanic affiliations, etc) which is not something simply 'added' to the biological self – a 'second nature' as Pascal famously put it – but the costume by means of which every human being is projected onto the social stage (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, pp. 262-263; 1958, p. 290). In other words, it is by taking on a social identity that each of us exists as a social being, becomes a 'person'. In this context Lévi-Strauss interprets the splitting of the face in Caduveo art as a graphic representation of a mask (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, pp. 263-264; 1958, p. 291) and as the expression of an ideology that is common in certain rigidly stratified societies in which the display of rank and position is all important.

In his third and final essay on Caduveo body painting, contained in Tristes Tropiques (1955; 1963b), Lévi-Strauss returns to these formal features and reinterprets them in the light of an argument that is a mix of structuralism, Freud and Marx. Caduveo society, at the time of Lévi-Strauss's visit, was divided into three castes that were on the verge of disintegrating into
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separate social structures. The neighbouring Mbaya possessed a similar caste system but its tendency to disaggregate was compensated by the existence of a moiety system that cut across the caste system. In other words, and to make explicit the connection with the formal structure of the Caduveo designs, the social structures of the Mbaya populations consisted in a careful balance between the asymmetrical caste system and the symmetrical moiety system. In short, in *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss interprets the Caduveo designs as a representation of Caduveo social institutions; or rather they are a representation of the institutions that the Caduveo lacked or were unable to have, those that had been developed by the Mbaya. The facial designs are, in this sense, the expression of a collective wish. And the function of this wish is, perversely, to maintain the status-quo and perpetuate inequality. The solution that the Mbaya enacted, the Caduveo were only able to dream of in their art. The Caduveo lesson, here, is that artistic practices play a key role in the perpetuation of social order and the power relations that underpin it.

Let us start to explore some of the aesthetic implications of this anthropological analysis. Caduveo body painting occupies an ambiguous position on the borderline between two-dimensional and three-dimensional systems of representation. At first inspection, Caduveo art may appear as a purely graphic art, whose purpose is the adornment of the body. However, the above formal analysis of the designs reveals that the human body does not simply constitute a surface that the artist paints, the flesh and bones equivalent of a canvas. As we have seen, the body is transformed – dislocated (split) – by the designs placed upon it. The designs and the bodies they ‘decorate’ form a whole. Caduveo art is at once a graphic and a plastic (sculptural) art, although, here, it is human bodies – those of the Caduveo women – that provide the ‘plastic’ element. The transformed body is the artwork. In this respect, far from being made up of purely abstract designs, Caduveo art may be related to figurative art, although it is an atypical figurative art-form, first because it is living bodies that provide the ‘figurative’ element and, second, because it is an art that disfigures at the same time as it figures. As Lévi-Strauss puts it: ‘this painting, instead of representing the image of a deformed face, actually deforms a real face’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, p. 255; 1958, p. 279). Caduveo art may in fact be seen as a kind of mimesis in reverse: instead of extracting from pre-existing ‘nature’ a duplicate image of nature, it applies pre-existing ‘unnatural’ abstract forms to nature – the human body – with the view of distorting or undoing it. Caduveo art conforms to the understanding of artistic ‘work’ put forward by Richard Wollheim (1968) in his essay ‘Minimal Art’. On the one hand, such ‘work,’ he says, is undoubtedly ‘constructive’: it involves a long and patient series of ‘nonrepetitive’ actions (e.g.: brush-strokes) whereby the artist elaborates a highly individuated object that differs recognisably from its real-life model. But Wollheim also makes a case for a different kind of work that is not constructive but destructive, a work that minimalism has taken to its furthest extreme. Its result is the ‘partial obliteration or simplifying of a more complex image that enjoyed some kind of shadowy pre-existence’ (Wollheim, 1968, p. 398). The originality of Caduveo body painting, in this respect, is that it is the human body itself, not the canvas or the sculpture, that is the support of this work of destruction. And the image produced by this art form, i.e. the image of the dislocated body, which results from the union of a body and a design, intriguingly, doesn’t exist except in the collective imagination. Caduveo art may therefore also be regarded as a form of virtual art.
My hypothesis is that the Caduveo essays occupy an important position in the development of Lévi-Strauss’s thought. They lie, as it were, at a junction. They lead Lévi-Strauss to two fundamentally conflicting ways of theorising artistic practices which in turn depend on two conflicting interpretations of the nature/culture dichotomy, a dichotomy that is central to Lévi-Strauss’s thinking but whose epistemological status is problematic “(Descola, 2004; Derrida, 2001)”. My aim, here, isn’t so much to point out the contradiction that Lévi-Strauss claims to solve but doesn’t. Other commentators have done so already. It is to explore what is productive for aesthetic theory in this tension between two paths of thought. Let us take them one by one.

Viewing Lévi-Strauss’s works in their development from the 1940’s to the end of the 1960’s, it becomes apparent that the Caduveo essays lead first of all to the Conversations with Charbonnier (1961) and, in particular, the general definition of the creative act put forward in them. It is this definition, I contend, that these essays are ‘working through’. By ‘undoing’ the natural symmetry of the human face, the Caduveo designs substitute one kind of order – a cultural order created by human beings – in place of another – a natural order. The designs dislocate the body to recompose it, as Lévi-Strauss puts it: ‘according to conventional rules having nothing to do with nature’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, p. 253; 1958, p. 278, my italics). A new whole is created, whose parts are related not by some inherent natural principle, but by virtue of an external (i.e.: artificial) one that transcends nature: ‘the […] face is […] dislocated […] by the systematic asymmetry by means of which its natural harmony is denied on behalf of the artificial harmony of the painting’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, p. 255; 1958, p. 279). Thus, Caduveo art creates, as Lévi-Strauss puts it: ‘an arbitrary individual’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, p. 254; 1958, p. 278). These insights into Caduveo art will coalesce, in the Conversations with Georges Charbonnier, and give rise to the basic proposition that the creative act brings about a passage from nature to culture (although the Conversations don’t mention the studies of Caduveo art, they constitute a kind of generalisation of the analyses contained in them). This is expressed on three occasions:

1) ‘art constitutes to the highest degree that take-over [“prise de possession”] of nature by culture which is essentially the type of phenomenon studied by anthropologists’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 107; 1961, p. 130).

2) ‘it seems to me that what we call aesthetic emotion is linked – or rather, is the way in which we react when a non-significant object is promoted to the role of signifier. [...] The true function of aesthetic transposition or promotion is to raise to the level of signification something which did not exist in this mode or form in its raw state’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, pp. 123-124; 1961, p. 150).

3) ‘[The artist] is someone who “aspires” the object into language [...] what [...] occurs [...] is a process of extraction or aspiration which turns the object from a natural into a cultural entity. It is in this sense that [...] the typical phenomenon which interests the anthropologist, i.e. the relationship between nature and culture and the transition from one to the other, is particularly well exemplified in art’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 124; 1961, p. 150).

These problematic aesthetic propositions – what follows will try to find a way to get beyond them – are clearly of prime importance to the development of Lévi-Strauss’s thought, since they provide the means of theoretically connecting the anthropological and aesthetic dimensions of his intellectual project. Beyond the Charbonnier interviews, they will ultimately lead to the ‘Overture’ of The Raw and the Cooked and its theorisation of the relations between myth, music, painting and poetry (for a discussion of this ‘typology’ of art forms, see Wiseman,
2007, Chapter 6). There is in the Lévi-Strauss of the Charbonnier interviews something of Michael Ayrton’s ‘Minotaur’. Ayrton, who was once a student of Henry Moore, depicted a kneeling Minotaur – a being that is part-human, part-beast – staring down at the palm of its extended hand, as if it had suddenly recognised its own dawning humanity and become lost in its contemplation. One may see in this image a fitting emblem of at least one part of Lévi-Strauss who, like the Minotaur, is fascinated by the boundary that divides the animal from the human, nature from culture, a boundary he cannot take his eyes off, yet that he is never quite able to grasp. For the Lévi-Strauss of the Charbonnier Conversations, art does not simply convert nature into culture; it provides a privileged access to the process of conversion, otherwise hidden from view. Aesthetic emotion is construed, here, as a kind of by-product of the sudden revelation, through art, of the spectacle of this transitional moment. Art satisfies a kind of scopophilic satisfaction. Revealingly, it is by means of a subtly eroticised corporeal metaphor that Lévi-Strauss describes the passage from nature to culture in the Conversations, which becomes a ‘prise de possession’, a ravishing of nature by culture. The moment when the one becomes the other constitutes, in Lévi-Strauss’s system of thought, the intellectual equivalent of a primal scene.

Now that I have connected the essays on Caduveo body painting to the above aesthetic generalisations, other connections come to light, this time with Lévi-Strauss’s earlier work on kinship. The generalisations about art put forward in the Charbonnier interviews assign to the act of aesthetic creation (aesthetic ‘promotion’) a similar function to that which he assigns to the incest taboo in The Elementary Structures of Kinship. Lévi-Strauss sees the incest taboo in positive terms as the means of bringing about exogamy. By prohibiting certain categories of kin, the incest taboo forces men to find women in other, more distant social groups, thereby constructing a broader social network. The incest taboo brings about a regulation of sexual relations, absent in the animal kingdom. More specifically, it dictates that sexual relations should take the form of a reciprocal exchange of women. Nature creates the need for a union but does not prescribe its form; it does not provide a rule for differentiating between acceptable and prohibited partners. With the formulation of the incest taboo and the setting in motion of the reciprocal exchange of women, culture imposes on nature a new order, a cultural order, in much the same way that Caduveo designs impose a man-made order on the natural shapes of the human body.

The act of aesthetic creation, as seen from the vantage point of the Charbonnier interviews, replicates or echoes the founding gesture by which a cultural order distinct from nature was once created. Lévi-Strauss says about the incest taboo that it is neither in nature or culture. Rather, it is ‘the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 24; 1967, p. 29). This ‘fundamental step’ provides Lévi-Strauss with a kind of prototype for the creative act. Art preserves the memory of this inaugural divide. It is worth citing, here, a little known text by Lévi-Strauss, a preface that he wrote for the catalogue of an exhibition on masks held at the musée Guimet in 1959. It condenses many strands of Lévi-Strauss’s thinking in a highly revealing passage, one that combines the above aesthetic concerns with a reflection on the nature of masks which, as we have already seen, are central to his interpretation of Caduveo body art. He writes:

In cosmetic there is cosmos; and it is not by chance that the word ‘mask’ has been introduced in the vocabulary of beauty salons. A ‘bushy’ hair style has always presented the image of nature in a wild and rebellious state, similar to that, described by myths, prior to the creation of man and the birth of society. When the elegant woman has her hair done, when she ‘masks’ her face with cream, powder and various dyes, when she rectifies irregular lines with her brush and pencil to
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give them a style, although she may not be aware of it, she is carrying out on her face – a universe in miniature – the gestures of the Demiurge, organising the cosmos, destroying monsters and introducing the arts of civilisation (Lévi-Strauss, 1989, p. 179, my translation).

The above conception of the creative act, as a conversion of nature into culture, the ‘raw’ object into a sign, is an anthropological version of a way of thinking about art, whose sources can be traced to the philosophers of Classical Antiquity and in particular Aristotle. A more recent antecedent is to be found in Baudelaire. I do not have the space to develop this connection in detail here. There is a famous section of The Painter of Modern Life entitled ‘In Praise of Cosmetics’ (the title of Lévi-Strauss’s first essay on the Caduveo, ‘Indian Cosmetics,’ alludes to it) in which the poet differentiates between two uses of makeup. The first, which he deplores, is naturalistic and seeks to conceal its own existence. The second, which provides a prototype for art all art, affirms unabashedly its own artifice. In Baudelaire’s own words, it consists of ‘a sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation’ (Baudelaire, 2003, p. 33). The definition that the 19th century art critic Charles Blanc gives of the notion of ‘style’ also applies very well to Caduveo body art and to the structural theory of aesthetic creation: ‘style’, he writes, ‘is the imprint of human thought on nature’. This echoes a definition of art attributed by Valéry to Degas, thought to be repeating Zola who was himself thought to be repeating Bacon: ‘Homo additus naturae’ (Valéry, 1998, p. 207). One might also have quoted Nietzsche’s The Gay Science: ‘This kind of deviation from nature is perhaps the most pleasant meal for human pride; for its sake man loves art as the expression of a lofty, heroic unnaturalness and convention. [...] Here nature is supposed to be contradicted’ (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 80).

As I have stated above, my hypothesis is that the Caduveo essays are a point of departure for two distinct strands of aesthetic thinking in Lévi-Strauss’s works. I have briefly outlined the first; let us now turn to the second. Beyond the generalisations outlined in the preceding pages, they lead to another very different strand of thinking about the relationship between art, nature and culture, one perhaps more in keeping with the Caduveo evidence. Here, the nature/culture dichotomy is not treated as an ontological distinction, as it was in what precedes, but rather, in Lévi-Strauss’s own words, as ‘an artificial creation of culture’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969b: p. XXIX; 1967, p. XVII). Put differently, according to this second way of thinking, the nature/culture dichotomy doesn’t designate a discontinuity inherent in ‘reality’ but rather categories in the various symbolic systems used by different populations to represent their relationship to ‘reality’. This alternative path, which leads away from ontological thinking, may be traced to the studies of Amerindian myths developed in the Mythologiques, a key source for a better understanding of what I am calling the mytho-poetic function (it is worth stressing that I am using the expression in a sense inspired by but different from that which Lévi-Strauss gives to it).

The Mythologiques series are concerned with the many different ways in which Amerindian populations have, locally, represented the nature/culture dichotomy in myths. More importantly, in the present context, they are concerned with where different populations have placed the divide. In the opening section of The Raw and the Cooked Lévi-Strauss analyses a series of myths told by three neighbouring populations, the Bororo, the Gé and the Tupi. All three deal, in their own way, with the theme of the origin of fire. Various heroes steal fire from animals. In the Gé series it is stolen from a jaguar who is thereby condemned to eating his food raw. In the Tupi series, it is stolen from vultures who are condemned to eating their food rotten (they become scavengers). Both series of myths evoke the passage from a state of affairs when humans and animals were not differentiated to one in which they are, a passage that corresponds to the institution of a social order. But the point of transition is different for the
Tupi and the Gé. The functional opposition for the Tupi, who trace the origin of fire to vultures, is that between cooked food and rotten food. For the Gé, for whom a jaguar was the original guardian of fire, it is that between cooked food and raw food. As Lévi-Strauss explains: ‘the dividing line between nature and culture is different, according to whether we are considering the Ge or the Tupi myths: in the former it separates the cooked from the raw; in the latter it separates the raw from the rotten. For the Ge, then, the raw + rotten relation is a natural category, whereas for the Tupi the raw + cooked relation is a cultural category’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1970, p. 143; 1964, p. 152).

My point, here, is that the boundary between nature and culture may be drawn and re-drawn in different places. It is variable. The divide is constructed through Amerindian mythological discourse. Viewing Caduveo body painting from the perspective of Amerindian myth, what comes to the fore is not so much the actual conversion of ‘nature’ into ‘culture’, which the generalisations of the Charbonnier interview suggest is the function of art in general, but the way in which the act of marking the skin makes visible a borderline, albeit a fictional one. What Caduveo art designates, according to this argument, is the interstice between the skin surface and the designs applied to it, an interstice symbolically assimilated to the place where nature and culture meet. Or rather, nature, culture and the supernatural, since, for the Caduveo, it is a supernatural order that provides the template for ‘cultural’ order. Over and above the culturally specific meaning of the designs (designation of rank, clanic affiliation, etc), it is this intersection that they arguably ‘signify’ or point towards. The dividing line between the different domains, however, has no prior existence in ‘external’ reality. It is generated at the level of the symbol. It exists only in and through its representation; it is performed by culture and indeed many different symbolic systems take on this task.

What I will try to show in the pages that follow is that other forms of art, in particular avant-garde art, fulfil the mytho-poetic function in as much as they too partake in this symbolic boundary-drawing process, in this attempt at marking out the limits of neighbouring domains. Although the modalities of this boundary marking process as well as its purposes (aesthetic, cultural, political, ethical, etc), vary greatly from culture to culture, one may nevertheless see it as something like a basic purpose of cultural creation.

Duchamp’s readymades are among the most written about art-works of the 20th century. How one interprets them depends very much on how one contextualises them. Duchamp himself emphasised the element of chance in their ‘creation’. This points to his Surrealist inspiration and will be important in what follows. In the case of ‘pure’, i.e. unmodified, readymades, such as Bottle Dryer, this act of creation consisted in no more than designating the object as a sculpture. Even the act of displaying the object came later. It is this creative minimalism which led some critics to question whether readymades are art at all. Critics have denounced the purely performative nature of the creative act: readymades are art simply by virtue of having been declared art. Readymades, however, are more subtle and complex objects than this suggests. Alfred Gell, for example, analyses the intricate connections that link one early readymade, ‘Three Standard Stoppages’, to part of Duchamp’s Large Glass and argues that Duchamp’s oeuvre is a total object that distributes its author’s agency according to conceptions of flow and temporality that owe much to Husserl, Bergson and the notion of durée (Gell, 1998, pp. 242-51). Ades, Cox and Hopkins (1999) usefully remind us that Duchamp, who was rejected by the Beaux-Arts, started off as a caricaturist. As they point
out, his readymades, which are elaborate puns of sorts, perpetuate this tradition. This is particularly apparent when it comes to sexual humour. Duchamp wanted his ‘Pliant de Voyage’, which resembles a mini-skirt, to be displayed at just the right height to tempt the viewer to look underneath it. More generally, Ades, Cox and Hopkins (1999, pp. 16-19) reveal all that Duchamp’s artistic practices owe to an important tradition of thinking about humour (Baudelaire and Bergson in particular) which emphasises the latter’s inherent conceptuality, its intellectual as opposed to affective nature (Duchamp termed his art ‘anti-retinal’). This trait runs through the avant-garde anti-mimetic tradition to contemporary conceptual art.

In the Charbonnier interviews, Lévi-Strauss expresses his ‘unease’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 88; 1961, p. 107) with the artistic invention that, at the dawn of the 20th century, stood art on its head, inaugurating a stage in the series of artistic revolution associated with modernism (the readymade, which paved the way for later developments such as minimalism, Pop art and installation art, in many ways anticipates post-modernism). For Charbonnier, when Duchamp displayed his *Bottlerack* (1914), he created a work of art by decontextualizing the object, bringing about a fission between the object and what it once signified. By removing the object from the cellar where it was used to dry bottles and placing it in his studio and then a gallery, Duchamp split the signifier and the signified that made up the *Bottlerack*. The effect is the visual equivalent of what happens when a word is repeated until it becomes divested of its meaning. This frees up our ability to apprehend the word purely in terms of its inherent sensory qualities, i.e. as a sound pattern. The act of displaying made the object once again unfamiliar – one might say, returning it to nature. As a result, for Charbonnier, the value of the readymade as a work of art is that: ‘reality itself [is] accepted by man as a work of art’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 98; 1961, p. 118) ‘if the artist disappears, the lesson to be learnt is perhaps that reality itself is a work of art’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 94; 1961, p. 114).

What Lévi-Strauss fundamentally objects to in Charbonnier’s theory of the readymade, is that it collapses the distance between the object and the work of art construed as a sign of the object; it confuses ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. With the readymade, in particular the ‘pure’ readymade, the object itself does not undergo a ‘transmutation’. There is no equivalent to the shaping of the marble block or the combining of colours on the canvas. The work of art is the ‘raw object’, which deliberately resists ‘promotion’ to a higher plane of semiotic existence. For Lévi-Strauss, however, there must always be a ‘profound homology’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a,
between the structure of the work of art and the structure of the object it signifies. As Lévi-Strauss says about Ingres: 'it seems to me that Ingres's secret is that he could give the illusion of a fac-simile (we need only think of his Cashmere shawls reproduced with all the most minute details of design and shades of colour) while at the same time the apparent fac-simile reveals a signification which goes far beyond perception and even extends to the structure of the object of perception (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 90; 1962, p. 109). With the readymade, where the real object is made to stand tautologically for itself, the structure of the signifier and that of the signified are, by definition, identical. There seems to be no room for the cognitive process whereby an object's hidden properties are brought to light.

Lévi-Strauss does find a way of allowing certain readymades to work in a way that is analogous to Ingres's cashmere shawls. Duchamp's act of displaying an object initially splits the object from what it signifies. However, the argument continues, this is only the first stage in a more complex process whereby the object is then associated to other new signifiers (Duchamp has himself sometimes attributed a similar purpose to his titles). Once the object is divorced from its function it becomes possible to perceive, via a series of free associations, the object's hidden relationship to other objects – for example, in the case of the Bottle Rack, says Lévi-Strauss, the skeleton of a fish. And, as a result of these associations, which bring about what Lévi-Strauss calls 'a [readjustment] of the relationship between signifier and signified' (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 93; 1961, p. 112), latent properties or qualities inherent in the égoutoir that are not normally perceived, such as its bizarrerie or its aggressiveness, are brought to light. After the exhibition, the viewer should have a better knowledge of what an égoutoir is.

Although Lévi-Strauss's analysis is in certain respects a penetrating one, it resolves the contradiction at the heart of the readymade, turns it unambiguously into art by assimilating its function to that of traditional mimetic art. The readymade challenges Lévi-Strauss's assumption that art converts nature into culture and it is this message that the above arguments seek to neutralise. What Lévi-Strauss doesn’t sufficiently acknowledge in the Charbonnier interviews – cannot, given his theoretical premises – is that the value of the readymade resides in its contradictory nature. Gell’s theory of art provides concepts that are useful for thinking about this aspect of the readymade.

In Art and Agency, Gell analyses the many different ways in which artefacts, and in particular works of art, embody complex forms of agency. He uses the notion of ‘indexing’. As he puts it: ‘Artefacts have the capacity to index their “origins” in an act of manufacture. Any artefact, by virtue of being a manufactured thing, motivates an abduction which specifies the identity of the agent who made or originated it’ (Gell, 1998, p. 23). He gives the example of a chipped stone found on a beach, which he identifies as a handaxe. This chipped stone indexes (‘makes present’, as it were) not only its maker’s agency but also that of its users and, once it is displayed by Gell on his mantelpiece, Gell’s own agency. One of the ways in which the readymade works is by throwing into disarray the way in which we read art-objects as indexes. As Duchamp famously put it, it is a work of art without an artist to make it. What makes the ‘artistic’ value of the readymade is precisely what makes it a problematic object for Lévi-Strauss to grasp with the concepts he uses in the Charbonnier interviews: it is an object that belongs at once inside and outside of art. Indeed, its function is to throw into sharp relief the problematic nature of the borderline between art and non-art, representation and reality and, by extension, nature and culture.

It is generally recognised (see Ades et al., 1999, p. 146) that Duchamp’s Bicycle Wheel (1913) was a half-satirical response to Boccioni’s ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture’ (1912). But whereas Boccioni made sculptures that used traditional illusionist means to
represent movement, Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* incorporated real movement. It is in this respect that it fulfils, like Caduveo body painting, the mytho-poetic function. Its value resides in the way it displaces art towards what Michael Fried calls 'objecthood', a gesture that minimalists such as Judd and Stella would later exploit more fully. In the process it makes visible a boundary whose problematic status had previously been overlooked, that between art (the realm of the sign) and non-art (the realm of 'things'). Its meaning, in other words, does not reside in itself but in its relation to everything around it. Compared to Caduveo body painting, however, this boundary marking process has a very different value. Whereas Caduveo art affirms the difference between nature and culture, the readymade aims to negate it. This reflects the very different status of these art forms in the societies that have produced them. Caduveo art is a traditional art form, that perpetuates a relatively stable style which itself serves to legitimise a certain social order. With the readymade, the mytho-poetic function is put in the service of a critical purpose (art has become art criticism and art criticism an instrument of change); it is the means of a radical interrogation of the very concept of art, its conditions of possibility and hence limits – limits that are brought to light by the very act of transgressing them. What the readymade ‘displays’ and simultaneously deconstructs, are the distinctions that have traditionally underpinned the European conception of ‘art’, among them the distinction between two modes of creation: manual, time consuming, highly skilled, individual, on the one hand, and mechanised, instantaneous, predetermined, impersonal, on the other. The readymade thus raises questions not only about the boundary between art and non-art but about the necessity for art to be unique, as opposed to mechanically produced/reproduced. Beyond these issues, it is the question of the nature of human agency that the readymade raises, with all that this implies for a re-appraisal of traditional humanism.

This reconfiguration by the readymade of the boundaries between art and non-art may be viewed against the background of broader social and cultural changes. As Lévi-Strauss reminds us in the Charbonnier interviews (Lévi-Strauss, 1969a, p. 98-99; 1961, pp. 118-119), Duchamp was not the first to display found objects. His gesture may be related to the late 18th century vogue of the curiosity-cabinet. More generally, it echoes the many artists who have collected objects found in nature. Lévi-Strauss cites the 16th century Florentine Mannerist sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, who recounts in his memoirs how he would wander the beaches in search of shells and other objects that had been shaped by the sea. These objects, like Duchamp’s, also have a problematic status. The twisted pieces of driftwood, the polished pebbles, resemble crafted objects, but they have been crafted directly by nature, not culture. They are the equivalent, in the lexicon of Amerindian mythological symbols, of honey: an ambiguous category of food which, like cooked food, is ready for human consumption, but that has been prepared – ‘cooked’ – by nature itself. Duchamp’s readymades at once mimic and parody these earlier ‘found objects’. The key difference, here, is that Duchamp’s readymades were invariably manufactured objects, products of culture, not nature (he distinguishes, in his Green Book, between the ‘readyfound’ and the mass produced ‘readymade’). But Bottlerack or his *Bicycle Wheel* are also washed up objects of sorts, found not on beaches but in Parisian backstreets or bric à brac. Here, it is not the natural forces of the sea that have shaped them, but factory machines which, by implication, have been endowed with the same autonomous powers of creation as nature. In the case of the natural ‘readyfound’ object, such as Cellini’s driftwood, the manufacturer is absent. His/her agency is anthropomorphically displaced onto nature and assimilated to a natural process. Nature becomes the artist, the ‘agent’ indexed by the object. With Duchamp’s readymades, this agency is further displaced onto ‘culture’, and assimilated to the anonymous forces of mass-production that were shaping the new urban environment. The machine becomes the artist or ‘agent’.
This displacement of agency is at the core of the machine-aesthetics endorsed by Boccini in his 1912 ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture’, already mentioned above. In a revealing passage Boccini writes: ‘We cannot forget that the […] opening and closing of two cogwheels […] the fury of a flywheel or the turbine of a propeller are all plastic and pictorial elements of which a Futurist sculpture must take account. The opening and closing of a valve creates a rhythm just as beautiful but infinitely newer than the blinking of an animal eyelid’. With the industrial revolution, the landscapes painted by Duchamp’s predecessors became urban landscapes, the forces that shaped them, mechanised ones. In one sense, this reduced the domain of nature. But Boccini’s manifesto suggests another reading of this transformation: ‘culture’ itself has substituted itself in the place of ‘nature’ and taken on the latter’s function, that of an autonomous and invisible force and creative principle. Culture becomes nature’s double, which is in part what Duchamp is expressing in an interview with Arturo Schwarz, where he compares the pleasure of looking at Bicycle Wheel with ‘looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace’ (as cited Archer, 2002, p. 146).

According to structural anthropology, mythical ‘schemas’ – i.e. the systems of oppositions that supports mythical narratives – are instruments for speculatively manipulating the categories in terms of which a given social group constructs its models of the world. They are similar to what Hubert Damisch calls ‘theoretical objects’, objects that at once call for theorisation and are the means of elaborating new theories and hence new ways of seeing, in the manner of the clouds he discusses in his Theory of the /Cloud/. In Lévi-Straussian terms, one would say that mythical schemas make use of images borrowed from the sensible world because they are ‘good to think with’ (The Savage Mind). Many avant-garde works of art, including Duchamp’s readymades, constitute ‘instruments’ of this kind. They are not necessarily rooted in narrative schemas, although they have increasingly included narratives; they tend to find their support in complex sensory objects: systems of colours, textures, forms, moving parts, sounds. These provide another (post-mythical) means of testing an order of the world, of exploring its limits and potentialities. These objects – at least as seen through an anthropological lens – are a modern day version of speculative cosmology, i.e. a form of thinking about the world as a whole. And, like their mythological counterparts, these art forms illustrate the recurring importance in speculative cosmology of the process of figuring and reconfiguring the boundaries between different domains, of marking their limits and of organising their interrelations and hence cultural imagination itself.

I have reached a point in my argument where it has become necessary to elaborate on my understanding of the borderline tracing process at work in the mytho-poetic function, first by extending the domains to which it pertains and second by complicating my presentation of the process itself. It is only once this has been done that I will be able to move onto the final work of art I would like to consider here.

(1) What the terms ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ denote within Western discourse are essentially orders of events that correspond to different types of causality. There are, however, more than two types of causality, ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’. One may usefully turn, here, to the work of philosopher Clément and, in particular, to his critique of the concept of nature in L’anti-nature (1986). As he shows very well, in much Western thought (this model would need to be altered for other systems of thought) the realm of ‘nature’ is essentially the realm of that which happens of its own accord – ‘spontaneously’ (Rosset, 1986, p. 240), to use Rosset’s
'Nature' provides a principle of production (growth/development) that exists independently of human intervention. Nature, as Rosset puts it, is the invisible force that makes grass grow. By contrast, the realm of culture is the realm of a causality related to free will, i.e. human action, a causality that is – allegedly – independent of the laws of nature. This distinction is inseparable from another: some entities contain their developmental principle in themselves (natural entities), while others are the product of some external principle or finality (the products of ‘culture’). The distinction is particularly important for anthropology, which purports to study external tradition. As Aristotle puts it in his Physics: ‘Some things exist by nature, others are due to other causes. Natural objects include animals and their parts, plants and simple bodies like earth, fire, air, and water [...]. The obvious difference between all these things and things which are not natural is that each of the natural ones contains within itself a source of change and of stability [...]. On the other hand, something like a bed [...] has no intrinsic impulse for change’ (Aristotle, 1999, p. 33). This idea is developed in On the Generation of Animals: ‘Heat and cold make the iron hard and soft, but the sword is made by the instruments’ movement that contains a definition belonging to art. For the art is source and form of the product, but in another thing; but the movement of nature is in the thing itself’ (Aristotle, 1972, p. 61). The idea of nature, taken in this sense, provides the background against which human action and freedom takes on meaning, is rescued from, on the one hand, a deterministic account of existence and, on the other, a purely arbitrary one. It enables humans to carve out a separate realm for themselves and act upon nature. This schema is culturally relative. It is, in its own way, a form of speculative cosmology, one that is firmly engrained in the way we think.

Rosset’s critique of what he calls the ‘naturalist illusion’ suggests that one needs to add other types of causality to those considered above, among them chance (I do not have the space to do so here, but in cases such as that of the Caduveo, one would also need to consider magical, or supernatural, forms of causality). According to Rosset, the realm in which chance is sovereign is that of matter. ‘Matter is chance: a mode of existence that is not only independent from human productions, but also indifferent to any principle or law’ (Rosset, 1986, p. 11, my translation). Matter is neither nature nor culture or, rather, it subsumes both. For Rosset, the falling stone does not so much connote an ‘obedience’ to the law of gravity, but an irreducible principle of inertia (Rosset, 1986, p. 12). For ‘naturalist’ philosophers (Rosset lists Plato and Aristotle among them) ‘nature’, ‘artifice’ and ‘chance’ form the points of a conceptual triangle that hold the illusion of the existence of nature in place. As Rosset puts it: ‘Between the gesture of the stone abandoning itself to its own weight and that of human action, there is supposed to be room for a certain type of gesture that is irreducible to both, the gesture of nature’ (Rosset, 1986, p. 12, my translation). The stuff of matter, although transformed and re-organised by natural ‘laws’, always escapes or is in excess of natural determination. The above three-way distinction may again be traced to Aristotle. Rosset usefully sums up the latter’s conceptions as follows: nature is spontaneous and teleological, artifice (i.e. the realm of culture) is teleological and non-spontaneous, chance is spontaneous and non-teleological (Rosset, 1986, p. 240).
In Lévi-Strauss’s vocabulary, chance is the ‘event’, whose integration into man-made structures is perceived as a fundamental human need. (I do not have the space here, for a detailed discussion of the place of the concept of chance in Lévi-Strauss’s thought, although it constitutes an important counter-principle.) In contrast to these views, Rosset argues for a ‘tragic’ view of the world that accepts the ultimately random nature of all causal chains. Everything, in the end, is chance, i.e. chaos, although we may sometimes be deluded into thinking that the patterns we observe are meaningful or willed or the result of some kind of teleology. However much we feel that our actions have effects in the world, that we can cause things to happen, these actions and their consequences are ultimately lost in broader sequences that no one has premeditated and that no principle guides.

(2) In elaborating one’s understanding of the mytho-poetic function, one needs also to consider the purpose of the borderline-drawing process, which cannot be viewed solely in terms of separation or differentiation. The act of tracing a border interconnects as much as it separates, it puts domains in contact with one another, allows passages from one to the other, indeed imbricates them. Here, the spatial metaphor that places one domain ‘next to’ or ‘on top of’ another no longer works. When the Caduveo paint their bodies, they bring the supernatural down to earth, mix it in with their quotidian environment, blurring boundaries. The gesture of tracing a borderline is therefore also a means of opening up one domain to another, in the case of the supernatural, a limitless one (this is integral to the erotic value of Caduveo body painting, just as the opening onto the ‘sublime’ is integral to the Baudelairian conception of the erotic value of makeup).

If one is to turn, now, to Arman’s *Arteriosclerose* (1961), the final example I would like to consider here, it becomes apparent that one may view it as a mythopoetic meditation on the interrelations between chance, human action and natural processes, and of the different kinds of causal relations associated with each. *Arteriosclerose* is a glass case containing several hundred identical forks and spoons. As an artefact it is the product of human action (the artist’s) and an expression of his free will. However, like Duchamp’s readymades, it reduces the domain of human intervention to the narrowest possible margin. The artist has not so much ‘made’ the work as made it possible. His role has consisted in emptying hundreds of forks and spoons into a case. This jumble of objects presents the image of a randomly piled up collection of items, the very antithesis of a work of art construed as a meditated composition or ordered totality. *Arteriosclerose* is something like a box for preserving a record of a random event. It recalls Duchamp’s ‘Three Standard Stoppages’ (1913-14) also referred to sometimes as ‘Tinned Chance’. (Duchamp dropped three one meter long threads onto a cloth to which he fastened them without altering their disposition. He then cut the cloth into strips which he stuck onto glass plates that he transferred to a wooden box.) The true ‘author’ of the work of art is chance itself. Or rather, to revert to Gell’s terminology, the random disposition of the contents of the box indexes chance as the ‘origin’ of the work.

![Arman, Arteriosclerose, 1961](image)
A closer examination of the assemblage reveals another seemingly contradictory level of reading. Although the way in which the forks and spoons have fallen into the case appears to have been random, after a more prolonged observation of the work, these start to form complex patterns, indeed they appear to have been arranged so as to form a composition. As such they do seem to index a ‘maker’. This is no doubt in part a by-product of the processes of semiotic fission already described above in connection with Duchamp’s readymades, whereby objects are viewed, as it were, in and for themselves, divested of any meaning derived from their function. The forks and spoons, by this process, are reduced to abstract forms, and the way in which these forms are repeated in the case, the way in which clusters create a sense of movement, generates something like an internal rhythm. In short, they take on a life of their own. The piece is not without recollecting, in this respect, Pollock’s action paintings. What at first appears to be the product of chance, upon closer inspection, is revealed to contain an order. The result is that we are drawn into the space of the box, as we are into the composed space of a traditional painted image. We can ‘enter’ this space in the manner of the perspectival space of a painting. What do we learn once we have done so?

Arman’s assemblage does not seek to resolve the contradictory readings suggested above. It fulfils the mythopoetic function precisely by bringing to light the tension between arbitrariness and necessity, random assemblage and intentional work of art. Arman’s box of forks and spoons doesn’t quite fit any of the Aristotelian categories outlined by Rosset. It presents the paradoxical image of a form of artifice that is spontaneous (the creative act is assimilated to a chance occurrence) and a form of chance that is teleological (the box contains an order). The viewer, here, is put in a position similar to that of the seer, carrying out acts of divination by interpreting patterns spontaneously produced by nature (the flights of birds, the way in which twigs fall), patterns that one is invited to assign to a cause beyond pure chance. In this connection, *Arteriosclerose* is not without certain spiritualist connotations.

One final feature of Arman’s *Arteriosclerose* needs to be considered in the context of this discussion. A third causal sequence is unfolding in the box: a number of the forks and spoons have started to rust. This process subjects Arman’s creation to an independent temporal cycle that negates the temporal cycle of the creative act. One that will eventually reduce the contents of the case to a pile of dust, a process for which the disease evoked by the title of the work provides a metaphor. Here, it is entropy – a ‘natural’ process that is the very opposite of nature construed as a developmental principle inherent in all things – that has the final word. The opposition with which this particular work of art grapples mythopoetically is none other than that which provided Hamlet with his most famous soliloquy, that between being and non-being.
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Claude Lévi-Strauss for allowing me to reproduce the photographs and other documents from his private collection contained in this article.

Notes

1 This article is adapted from Chapter 6 of my book (2007) *Lévi-Strauss, Anthropology and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2 Reproduced in *Structural Anthropology*.

3 Gell has added to this dossier by suggesting that figures on Marquesan tortoiseshell crowns are instances of split representation (Gell, 1998, pp. 193-6).

4 Some representations of Olmec supernatural beings also manifest a sharp cleft in their forehead, which has been interpreted as an allusion to the jaguars or toads with which these gods are associated. Indeed, these animals naturally possess an indented scull (Miller, 2001, p. 19). A similar explanation may also be suggested for this Caduveo drawing, which one could therefore interpret not as evidence of ‘split representation’ but of animistic beliefs.

5 See, for example, the preface to the 2nd French edition of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and the footnote in *The Savage Mind*, where he writes: ‘The opposition between nature and culture to which I attached much importance at one time [...] now seems to be of primarily methodological importance’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 247; 1962, p. 294).

6 The Caduveo, as described by Lévi-Strauss, seem to share the Baudelairian dandy’s ‘horror’ of nature.

7 The context is Nietzsche’s discussion of the Athenian love of ‘good speech’.

8 I have amended the translation, which is misleading.

9 Clement Greenberg writes: ‘the Minimalists [...] commit themselves to the third dimension because it is [...] a coordinate that art has to share with non-art (as Dada, Duchamp and others already saw). The ostensible aim of the Minimalists is to “project” objects and ensembles of objects that are just nudgeable into art’ (Greenberg, 1968, p. 183).

10 As Lévi-Strauss points out in *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 16; 1962, p. 30), the word *bricolage* was used in old French in the context of games such as billiards to denote the accidental movement of the bouncing ball, a movement that the billiards player seeks to master.
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