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# Geoghegan, B. D, From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus (2011)

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In his 1962 masterpiece of structural analysis, *The Savage Mind*, Claude Lévi-Strauss set about overturning the centuries-old belief that European scientific and technical reasoning, by dint of its rational and well-ordered procedures, was superior to "primitive thought." Lévi-Strauss did not appeal for paternalistic tolerance towards subaltern cultures, however, nor did he tout the situated or local character of native knowledge. Instead, he celebrated the great genius of the savage mind to have long ago recognized and understood what Western scientists working in the field of information theory had only recently discovered: the world is organized into a discrete series of signals and messages that invite our recognition and interpretation.

In treating animals, plants, and other aspects of the natural world as a system of obscure signs, the savage mind had discovered "*principles of interpretation whose heuristic value and accordance with reality have been revealed to us [Westerners] only recently through very recent inventions: telecommunications, computers, and electron microscopes*" (SM,p.268). Lévi-Strauss explained that after centuries of division between civilized and savage man, the tools of the former had at last verified the intuitions of the latter. "*The entire process of human knowledge,*" he declared, "*thus assumes the character of a closed system*" (SM,p.269).

Any information theorist who stumbled upon Lévi-Strauss's assertions would have likely responded with astonishment. At the time, information theory was a subfield of communication engineering dedicated to the study of how improved encryption codes enabled more efficient and error-resistant data transmission. Associations with digital computing and cybernetics brought wider renown and interest in information theory, but, apart from a few emerging applications in satellite communications, it was an area of mostly hypothetical inquiry for a small and specialized community of engineers.

How is it that the father of French structuralism came to celebrate the instruments and techniques of digital media as agents of a grand reconciliation between Western and primitive cultures?

The answer to this question involves an investigation into the history of media, technology, global science, and the assembly of what I term the cybernetic apparatus.

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