

1989

Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible (Book Review)

Gary Shapiro

University of richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/philosophy-faculty-publications>

Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. Review of *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible*, by Peter Caws. *Teaching Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (1989): 327.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible, Peter Caws Humanities Press, 1988, 276 pp., \$45 cl.

Throughout this book Peter Caws reminds the reader of the anomalous place that the study occupies in relation to intellectual fashions. His book, he suggests, is un timely (think of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* here) for at least two audiences. The French, he says, after having discovered structuralism in the 1950's and 1960's, soon passed blithely on to various forms of post-structuralism without pausing to see the real strength and scope of what they were so eager to surpass. Philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition have, at the other extreme, not yet caught up with structuralism and tend to dismiss it as one more trendy import. Caws, whose philosophical sympathies are Anglo-American, thinks that the latter have been too slow and aloof to recognize a significant intellectual movement while the continentals have been too precipitous in attempting to move "beyond" structuralism. My guess is that the book is more likely to be successful with the first group than with the second, for its project of systematic restatement and critique makes many more gestures toward Russell, Carnap, and Wittgenstein, than toward Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida.

Structuralism is divided into two parts, the first being an informative overview of structuralism in linguistics and the human sciences, the second a critical account of "Structuralism as Philosophy" that asks a number of careful questions about meaning, language, and system. The tone is often disarmingly light and conversational, and there are enough learned *aperçus* to maintain the reader's engagement even in the more technical reaches of phonetics and kinship theory. It is now possible, Caws proposes, to see just what structuralism was up to, and he offers a witty, cosmopolitan tour of Saussurean linguistics and the later modifications or alternatives proposed by such thinkers as Jakobson and Troubetzkoy. Throughout Caws reminds us of the affinities between those thinkers commonly called structuralists and the structural motifs or themes to be found in such theorists as Ernst Cassirer, Charles Peirce, and the American anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan (whose work was partially absorbed by Marx and Engels, providing the grounds for some of the later structuralist appropriations of Marxism). Caws offers a clear account of Saussure's principle that "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (73) and goes on to differentiate the forms of structuralist differentiation, exhibiting the possibility of a structuralist account of the various aspects or varieties of the movement itself. However, this reflexive move is subordinated to the historical narrative which is the skeleton of Caws's account, so that his work embodies some of the same tensions between history and structure that provide themes for the structuralists. But the story is an informative one and is a good example of what Caws calls "in-struction" in which structures are replicated from mind to mind (e.g., 215). Levi-Strauss plays a role in Caws's reconstruction of anthropological structuralism that parallels Saussure's in his account of linguistics; the transformational structures of myth and kinship are elucidated carefully, but the master's presentation is not beyond criticism. Caws concludes the more historical part of the book on a provocative note by attempting to place deconstruction within the structuralist camp, rather than seeing it as a radical alternative. Properly understood, he argues, deconstruction is a response to overinflated claims for "absolute structure" (159). It is not an alternative world view, but an imperative to analyze our commitment to various structural principles. It is, we might say, the vigilant, critical side of structuralism as opposed to its possibility of lapsing into dogmatism.

The general strategy of the book's second major section, "Structuralism as Philosophy" is to give a critical account of structuralist theory and practice in the light of traditional Anglo-American concerns with meaning, representation, human nature and the idealism/realism controversy. Caws wants to show that attention to structure or relationality as such is to be found in Russell's theory of relations, Carnap's notion of the structure of experience, and Wittgenstein's claim that "form is the possibility of structure." It is not a novel observation that there has been something like a linguistic turn in both the English-speaking and the continental philosophical worlds in this century, but Caws makes this analogy concrete through his detailed knowledge of both traditions. In the spirit of the anglophones, he thinks that we can recognize all the structure we want, so long as we do not fall into the error of supposing that it must be part of a global or total system. Here the grand enemy of both that tradition and of a self-critical structuralism is what is usually called Hegelian idealism. Characteristically Caws's example of such a totalistic system comes from a late American follower of the absolute idealists, Brand Blanshard. In a detailed criticism of Blanshard's position, Caws shows some sympathy for his concern with intelligible structure but he thinks that we can stop short of Blanshard's goal of finding necessity within a system and settle for the more modest structuralist aim of accommodating what is to be understood within an intelligible system (208). This leads to a consideration of the idealist side of absolute idealism. Both Blanshard and the structuralists lapse too easily into one or another variety of idealism, Caws claims. But structures can be acknowledged on a materialist basis, and in fact Caws thinks that the structuralists have given us no reason to doubt materialism; that is, they have given us no reason to doubt that "the life of thought is embedded inextricably in a context of materiality" (245). Finally Caws would like to call his position "structuralist materialism" (252).

This book will provide an excellent introduction to structuralism for anyone who has been waiting for a guide relatively free of French or German philosophical commitments. The first part of the book might very well serve as a secondary text in an advanced undergraduate course that also wanted to grapple with some Saussure and Levi-Strauss. The second part could also be read, but because it engages with a particular series of issues that are most germane to the Anglo- American tradition, a truly catholic treatment of the subject would do well to include more recent continental responses to structuralism, from such writers as Jacques Derrida and Manfred Frank.

Gary Shapiro, Philosophy, University of Kansas, Lawrence