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# THE UNSYSTEMATIC SURVIVAL OF SYSTEMS: THE PARASITE, THE JOKER AND THE BRICOLEUR IN MICHEL SERRES AND CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS

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## ABSTRACT

With our increasing reliance on systems from information theory to economics, it is important to understand how systems are constructed, how they break down and how they preserve themselves. The philosopher Michel Serres in his work *The Parasite* showed how systems can never preserve their order in a pure manner; they always involve noise and lost signals. He explores this by employing the idea of parasitism from biology. But the problem remains of how systems maintain themselves in the face of parasitism. This paper will explore the concept of bricolage conceived by structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his seminal work *The Savage Mind*. This concept can be found within a single ambiguous quotation by Serres in *The Parasite*, but remains undeveloped. This article will therefore develop these connections between bricolage and parasitism, and show how bricolage is important to the adaptation of any system to change.

**Keywords:** Michel Serres; Claude Levi-Strauss; parasitism; bricolage; systems theory; the joker

## Introduction

When one thinks of a parasite, they will most commonly associate the term with the biological organism that thrives on or within another organism, done for the perpetuation of its own life by taking away resources from a host body that it has invaded without killing it. Michel Serres in his work *The Parasite* argues that this idea of parasitism, as a concept, can be applied to describe a disturbance within any system or set of relations. He explains how and why the relations between any two entities are never pure, never clear, and the messages that are sent are always disturbed or intercepted by another entity. This phenomenon makes relations possible but disruptions to any stable system will always be present. Serres refers to the intruder responsible for this phenomenon as the parasite. However, in the work *The Parasite*, Serres also introduces the terms ‘the joker’ and ‘bricolage’:

“That joker is a logical object that is both indispensable and fascinating. Placed in the middle or at the end of a series, a series that has a law of order, it permits it to bifurcate, to take another appearance, another direction, a new order. The only describable difference between a method and bricolage is the joker. The principle of bricolage is to make something by means of something else, a mast with a matchstick, a chicken wing with tissue meant for the thigh, and so forth. Just as the most general model of method is game, the good model for what is deceptively called bricolage is the joker. “<sup>1</sup>

Bricolage is a famous term from the work of Levi-Strauss entitled *The Savage Mind* where he uses it to distinguish the thought processes of archaic societies from modern society. The archaic thinker operates like a bricoleur (one who uses what is at-hand to solve a problem) while the modern thinker operates like an engineer (one who creates special tools to solve a problem). Serres’ definition of bricolage is straightforward in the spirit of Levi-Strauss, that a bricoleur, plays around and creates

something new out of an assembly of available things at his disposal. It can be assumed by this then that Serres must have been familiar with *The Savage Mind*.

Yet Serres does not cite or give credit to Claude Levi-Strauss or *The Savage Mind* for his incorporation of the concept of bricolage. Serres' implementation of bricolage into his own work shall thus be examined in relation to his concept of parasitism. The wordage that was used here, including 'game' and 'method' will first be studied. Moreover, in *The Parasite* Serres's introduction of another term called 'the joker' places it in clear connection to the idea of bricolage. What is the joker and what exactly is its conceptual affiliation with either bricolage or parasitism? This article will seek to answer this and summarize the findings to best fully understand Serres's quotation in question.

### **On Game and Method**

Serres uses the terms 'game' and 'method' in *The Parasite*. He considers these terms as being analogous to bricolage and jokerism, yet he gives no explanation why. To understand this we can turn to the work which first propagated the concept of bricolage, namely *The Savage Mind* by Claude-Levi Strauss, as a possible source and starting point of reference to help uncover the mystery. In *The Savage Mind*, Levi-Strauss writes:

“In the case of games the symmetry is therefore preordained and it is of a structural kind since it follows from the principle that the rules are the same for both sides. Asymmetry is engendered: it follows inevitably from the contingent nature of events, themselves due to intention, chance or talent. The reverse is true of ritual. There is an asymmetry which is postulated in advance between profane and sacred, faithful and officiating, dead and living, initiated and uninitiated, etc., and the 'game' consists in making all the participants pass to the winning side by means of events, the nature and ordering of which is genuinely structural.”<sup>2</sup>

How Levi-Strauss uses the idea of ‘game’ reveals that it is indeed an example of a structure, and that structures require the implementation of rules of which opposing participants follow. He juxtaposes this with the notion of ritual in which the participating elements are divided between distinct roles and meanings. Levi-Strauss goes on to say:

“Like science (though here again on both the theoretical and the practical plane) the game produces events by means of a structure; and we can therefore understand why competitive games should flourish in our industrial societies. Rites and myths, on the other hand, like ‘bricolage’ (which these same societies only tolerate as a hobby or pastime), take to pieces and reconstruct sets of events (on a psychical, socio-historical or technical plane) and use them as so many indestructible pieces for structural patterns in which they serve alternatively as ends or means.”<sup>3</sup>

He proceeds to liken the game to science, in which it can be shown that whatever observable happenings that take place can be explained because of an established underlying structure that is governed by specific laws. These laws are to be followed by everyone and when enacted produce events. Like the competitor of a game following rules, a scientist must follow the laws of science as a means pursuing a perceived goal in a determined ordered process. These laws of science are, much like the rules of a game, “preordained” before the scientist engages in his work. A scientist then is really no different than someone playing to win a game. On the opposite end of this lies ritual, which Levi-Strauss ties to being like bricolage, the implication here is that rites and myths take fragments and leftovers from an existing set of something in order to build a new meaningful construct, which is prone to dismemberment resulting in revisions in meaning or purpose at any time. Truth, therefore, is not its concern.

Interestingly, Serres in *The Parasite* gives his own interpretation of science and the scientist that could be seen as in agreement with Levi-

Strauss's take:

“Science develops its theory via observation and experimentation. It also changes the material for the logical; that is its technique and its method. No one accomplishes this sublimation with more control and security than the scientist. He has even tried to eliminate lying along the way. Science collects as much information on the state of things as it can, and if it can, all information available. Experimentation and observation suppose parasitic branchings and balances that are always in favor of those who intercept.”<sup>4</sup>

Serres understands that science requires a sort of reductionism and that the theories it decides on are dependent on a very particular method. It must deduce what it has gathered before it goes down through a process of elimination to ensure that only an objective truth behind the mounds of information remains. The scientist is like a gamer in which the rules he abides to are meant for the reduction of disorganization, a standardized format that enables the observers and participants alike to come to a shared understanding. This creates a level of order for those actively involved, which Serres himself attests creates an environment that invites parasitism.

The obstacle, however, is the attempt to determine what Serres meant with his use of method. He asserts that it serves as the “general model” of game. While Serres admitted that scientists do evoke certain method in their practices, how does this differ from others? Does a non-scientist who does not follow the laws of science, or simply does not abide to structuralism, not have method at all? The key to making a distinction here is in the relation to games. If we are to follow Levi-Strauss's thought, that games are in the same stratosphere as science in terms of their preordained rules and structures, then the term ‘method’ in this case applies within this context. We can come to acknowledge the term ‘method’ as an established procedure systematically applied towards

known possible outcomes. In games, it's win, lose or draw. In science, it's proven, disproven or unproven. In other words, there's no grey area.

A non-scientist, the bricoleur in the spirit of rite-based mythmaking, therefore, may have a certain *method to their madness* but it is not necessarily done with the same preordained rules and results each time. A bricoleur can keep constructing, reconstructing, and deconstructing with a recycled set of materials and resources to no end, every product of his work having differing unpredictable outcomes and changing meanings. It can be implied that game serves as the “general model” for method because any activity that satisfies the aforementioned criteria is equivalent to a player in a game, following rules in a structured setting that is uniform across all constituents, is penalized for not following a standard procedure, and is all enacted towards an outcome that must be objectively true.

### **The Bricoleur and the Joker**

We have established that a bricoleur is one who enacts bricolage by playfully creating something from other things that it has at hand and can continue to do so indefinitely through ongoing constructions and deconstructions. While a bricoleur may be “playing around”, this article argues that he is not “playing a game” since a game requires method, specific predetermined rules that govern its structure and events toward an indisputable objective result. Given this, why then does Serres include the concept of bricolage in his work that is all about parasitism? At this point, it would outright make one assume that Serres is trying to imply that bricolage is in fact a form of parasitic activity. But before proving this, however, it must be first brought to attention his connection between bricolage and what Serres calls the joker. But what is the joker, and what is its relationship to the parasite?

First, let us study the parasite in further depth. Harari and Bell, writing in their introduction to Serres' work *Hermes*, denote that the parasite “presents itself in a negative guise: it is viewed as a malfunction, an error, or a noise within a given system. Its appearance elicits a strategy

of exclusion. Epistemologically, the system appears as primary, and the parasite as an unhappy addition that it would be best to expel. Such an approach, however, misses the fact that the parasite, like the demon and the third man, is an integral part of the system.”<sup>5</sup> Here we can observe the parasite serves a dual function to a system, as an included and excluded third. It is included because the system cannot be possible without it, yet simultaneously it is excluded because the system still sees it as a harmful guest. It is considered a “third man”, meaning it is intercepting the communication between a first and second man. This is how it receives its description as a parasite, thriving off the connection it is intercepting and keeping it in an ever-disruptive state.

Additionally, in *The Parasite* Serres describes the entity he calls the joker as having “at least two values, like the third man: a value of destruction and a value of construction. It must be included and excluded.”<sup>6</sup> From this it can be acknowledged that the joker is actually a parasite, for it does fulfill the characteristics of one. It is almost as if the two ideas are mutually interchangeable and are one in the same thing. But if this is true, what differences are there between them, if any? Steven D. Brown explains:

“It can take on all the possible positions... Jokers are ‘wild’ in the sense that they are unpredictable – we do not know what will happen when they are put into play. So the joker, as a special kind of parasite, is an engineer of difference, of complexity. It leads relations to go astray. Identifying the joker is an important development in Serres’ thought, since this figure seems capable of breaking the chain of parasitism.”<sup>7</sup>

Here, we come to understand that while the joker may be a parasite and bears its basic traits, as Brown describes, it is a special kind, a different sort of variety. According to Brown, this brand of parasite is capable of destroying parasitism altogether because the relations it is parasitizing get out of control. It may be implied then that a “regular parasite” does

not have the capability of destroying the parasitic process. A parasite cannot allow itself to be destroyed, just as it cannot allow its host to be destroyed, not if it wishes to survive. The joker, on the other hand, with its apparent quality of being volatile and unpredictable, is a parasite that appears to be unconcerned with this.

Why was the term ‘joker’ used in this context? When one thinks of a joker, they may imagine a deck of 52 playing cards which consists of 13 ranks among four suits: clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades. Each suit includes an Ace card and three face cards: King, Queen and Jack. Later decks began using “joker cards” and their purpose was for replacing any cards in the deck that may have been lost or damaged. When put into play in card games, the joker card can also be used to take the place of any value of another card, or if instituting rule changes or has exceptions. It is for this reason they are labeled as “wild cards”. They can take on any form and change their identity and purpose. A game’s outcome, when jokers are included, becomes less predictable and more uncertain, hence “wild”.

At the same time, a joker also does not have any one single value or identity. What this ends up painting is a unique, very distinguishable type of parasite. Serres states, “The joker, in the position of bifurcation, makes it possible by the confluence of values that it insures. It is both what has been said and what will be said. It is bi-, tri-, or poly-valent, according to the complexity of the connection. The ramification of the network depends on the number of jokers. But I suspect that there is a limit for this number. When there are too many, we are lost as if in a labyrinth.”<sup>8</sup> Serres never says that there can be too many “regular parasites” within a chain that could threaten to disable parasitic activity altogether. This may be due to the fact that “regular parasites” pose no threat to a system or relation other than the basic harmful effects they cause. The joker, due to its unpredictable nature of assuming any or all identities, has the potentiality to cause confusion and death.

Furthermore, another term used interchangeably with the joker is the ‘white domino’. Serres explains, “This white object, like a white domino, has no value so as to have every value. It has no identity, but

its identity, its unique character, its difference, as they say, is to be, indifferently, this or that unit of a given set. The joker is king or jack, ace or seven, or deuce... A is b, c, d, etc. Fuzzy.”<sup>9</sup> Anyone familiar with color theory recognizes that the color white is created by the combination of all colors. Supporting this position is Brown when he stresses that the joker (or blank domino) is abstract and blank, like a mobile white space which can be deployed in any position.<sup>10</sup> Similar to the joker card in a card game, the blank or white piece in a game of dominos can be played next to any numbered domino since the values can be whatever one needs them to be. But having the quality of being white does not equate the blank domino to being empty or absent of values. Hagemeyer explains:

“To say that the white is the sum of all colours is basically the same as saying that it encompasses all values belonging to a particular set. We are now able to grasp to notion of the white multiple. Being white is not the same as being empty. The white denotes the fact that there is no transcendental essence to such an element. One can write on its surface over and over again; the joker can be played time and time again in combination with any set of cards. Its value always depends on a number of specific relations, is always situated. The concept of the white multiple therefore debunks the stream of thought that is commonly referred to by the term ‘structuralism’.”<sup>11</sup>

Here, Hagemeyer continues by calling the joker the ‘white multiple’, referring to its ability to shapeshift into more than one identity. The joker as a white domino or white multiple possesses a condition of versatility by being able to be deployed in any circumstance, further cementing its reputation for being a harbinger of relations gone awry. Hagemeyer ends by mentioning how this concept is in direct opposition to the concept of structuralism. It may be argued, then, that the joker is a structuralist’s worst nightmare.

If we can view a game as a structure, one that requires method, we can now see a more visible connection between bricolage and jokerism, both clearly being anti-structure. Because bricolage is about performing acts of construction and deconstruction, it is in the same league with the joker because it possesses these same two values. With each construct the bricoleur builds, he is giving it a different value or meaning, only to deconstruct it and start over again with a new project to work on. This seems incredibly similar to the way the joker operates, in which its meaning and value can also change because its identity and purpose are also never static. It too has the potentiality to deconstruct a system or set of relations, both of which can be considered structures with rules. Like the bricoleur, the joker is not bound by any predetermined rules or method; it in fact lives outside of them. Both behave unpredictably and the outcomes to their activities are not always clear. Ultimately, a bricoleur can be an example of a joker and vice-versa. Because a bricoleur is an example of a joker, it also deems it as an example of a parasite, thus bricolage would undoubtedly be a form of parasitism. However, it may affirm that Serres must have deliberately conjoined bricolage with the joker specifically for the sole purpose that it has much more in common with jokerism than merely a regular parasite”, which explains why it serves as a “good model”.

## **Conclusion**

When bringing up Serres’ claim that the only describable difference between a method and bricolage is the joker, this article can come to the following conclusive statements. Recall Serres’ suggestion that experimentation and observation, both activities of scientists, still allow parasitism to incur. Scientists, with their emphasis on order, may not be entirely free of parasitic disorder because they still require its presence to engage in their work. But as the player of a rule-based game and the user of a method, a scientist must stick to maintaining structure towards an objective truth and not keep changing his identity or purpose. Bricolage, on the other hand, through its own experimentations and observations

and apathy towards truth, is completely defined by its nature of constant creating and changing and lack of adherence to structure, inducing parasitism through the taking of resources from existent sources like rites and myths. So, while neither method nor bricolage are free from parasitism, the distinguishing feature between them is jokerism because the bricoleur distinctively resembles the joker through his perpetual acts of constructions and destructions. The conceptual link between Serres and Levi-Strauss regarding these terms becomes apparent.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 160-61

<sup>2</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Letchworth, Hertfordshire: The Garden City Press Limited, 1962), 22

<sup>3</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 22

<sup>4</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 212

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*. trans. by Josue V. Harari and David F. Bell. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1983), xxvii-xxvii

<sup>6</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 67

<sup>7</sup> Steven D. Brown, "Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite." *Theory, Culture & Society* 19 no. 3 (2002), 20

<sup>8</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 162

<sup>9</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 160

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite*, 20

<sup>11</sup> Rouven Ernst Hagemeijer, *The Unmasking of the Other*. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Netherlands. 2005, 55

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