

permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought, and a proposal for another means besides philosophy for the creation of concepts.

But in the end, anthropology is what is at stake. The intention behind this tour through our recent past is in effect far more prospective than nostalgic, the aspiration being to awaken certain possibilities and glimpse a break in the clouds through which our discipline could imagine, at least for itself qua intellectual project, a denouement (to dramatize things a bit) other than mere death by asphyxia.

## Chapter Two

### Perspectivism

Such a requalification of the anthropological agenda was what Tânia Stolze Lima and I wanted to contribute to when we proposed the concept of Amerindian *perspectivism* as the reconfiguration of a complex of ideas and practices whose power of intellectual disturbance has never been sufficiently appreciated (even if they found the word relevant) by Americanists, despite its vast diffusion in the New World.<sup>9</sup> To this we added the synoptic concept of *multinaturalism*, which presented Amerindian thought as an unsuspected partner, a dark precursor if you will, of certain contemporary philosophical programs, like those developing around theories of possible worlds, others that refuse to operate within the vicious dichotomies of modernity, or still others that, having registered the end of the hegemony of the kind of critique that demands an epistemological response to every ontological question, are slowly defining new lines of flight for thought under the rallying cries of transcendental empiricism and speculative realism.

The two concepts emerged following an analysis of the cosmological presuppositions of “the metaphysics of predation” evoked

9. For the chief formulations of the idea, see Tânia Stolze Lima, “The Two and Irs Many: Reflections on Perspectivism in a Tuna Cosmology” (1999[1996]), and *Um Peixe Olhou para Mim: O Povo Yudjá e a Perspectiva* (2005). See also Viveiros de Castro “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism” (1998), ‘Perspectivismo e multinaturalismo na América indígena’ (2002a), “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation” (2004a), and “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies” (2004b). In what follows, I repeat themes and passages from these articles already known to the anthropological public, but which other readers will benefit from having reprised.

in the last chapter. We found that this metaphysics, as can be deduced from Lévi-Strauss' summary of it, reaches its highest expression in the strong speculative yield of those indigenous categories denoting matrimonial alliance, phenomena that I translated with yet another concept: *virtual affinity*.<sup>10</sup> Virtual affinity is the schematism characteristic of what Deleuze would have called the "Other-structure"<sup>11</sup> of Amerindian worlds and is indelibly marked by cannibalism, which is an omnipresent motif in their inhabitants' relational imagination. Interspecific perspectivism, ontological multinaturalism and cannibal alterity thus form the three aspects of an indigenous alter-anthropology that is the symmetrical and reverse transformation of Occidental anthropology—as symmetrical in Latour's sense as it is reverse in the sense of Wagner's "reverse anthropology." By drawing this triangle, we can enter into the orbit of one of the philosophies of "the exotic peoples" that Lévi-Strauss opposed to ours and attempt, in other words, to realize something of the imposing program outlined in the fourth chapter, "Geophilosophy," of *What Is Philosophy?* ... even if it will be at the price—but one we should always be ready to pay—of a certain methodological imprecision and intentional ambiguity.



Our work's perfectly contingent point of departure was the sudden perception of a resonance between the results of our research on Amazonian cosmopolitics—on its notion of a perspectivist multiplicity intrinsic to the real—and a well-known parable on the subject of the conquest of the Americans recounted by Lévi-Strauss in *Race and History*:

In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards sent out investigating commissions to ascertain whether or not the natives had a soul, the latter were engaged in the drowning of white prisoners in order to verify, through prolonged watching, whether or not their corpses were subject to putrefication. (L.-S. 1978b[1952]: 329)

10. Viveiros de Castro 2001b; 2002b. See below, chapter 11.

11. Deleuze 1990a.

In this conflict between the two anthropologies, the author perceived a baroque allegory of the fact that one of the typical manifestations of human nature is the negation of its own generality. A kind of congenital avarice preventing the extension of the predicates of humanity to the species as a whole appears to be one of its predicates. In sum, ethnocentrism could be said to be like good sense, of which perhaps it is just the apperceptive moment: the best distributed thing in the world. The format of the lesson is familiar, but that does not lessen its sting. Overestimating one's own humanity to the detriment of the contemptible other's reveals one's deep resemblance with it. Since the other of the Same (of the European) shows itself to be the same as the Other's other (of the indigenous), the Same ends up unwittingly showing itself to be the same as the Other.

The anecdote fascinated Lévi-Strauss enough for him to repeat it in *Tristes Tropiques*. But there he added a supplementary, ironic twist, this time noting a difference (rather than this resemblance) between the parties. While the Europeans relied on the social sciences in their investigations of the humanity of the other, the Indians placed their faith in the natural sciences; and where the former proclaimed the Indians to be animals, the latter were content to suspect the others might be gods. "Both attitudes show equal ignorance," Lévi-Strauss concluded, "but the Indian's behavior certainly had greater dignity" (1992: 76). If this is really how things transpired,<sup>12</sup> it forces us to conclude that, despite being just as ignorant on the subject of the other, the other of the Other was not exactly the same as the other of the Same. We could even say that it was its exact opposite, if not for the fact that the relation between these two others of humanity—animality and divinity—is conceived in indigenous worlds in completely different terms than those we have inherited from Christianity. The rhetorical contrast Lévi-Strauss draws succeeds because it

12. As Marshall Sahlins observed in *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (1995), the association of colonial invaders with local divinities, a phenomenon observed in diverse encounters between the Moderns and indigenous peoples, says much more about what the Indians thought about divinity than about what they thought of Europeaness or modernity.

appeals to *our* cosmological hierarchies rather than those of the Taino.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, consideration of this disequilibrium was what led us to the hypothesis that Amerindian ontological regimes diverge from those widespread in the West precisely with regard to the inverse semiotic functions they respectively attribute to soul and body. The marked dimension for the Spanish was the soul, whereas the Indian emphasized the body. The Europeans never doubted that the Indians had bodies—animals have them too—and the Indians in turn never doubted that the Europeans had souls, since animals and the ghosts of the dead do as well. Thus the Europeans' ethnocentrism consisted in doubting that the body of the other contained a soul formally similar to the one inhabiting their own bodies, while the ethnocentrism of the Indians, on the contrary, entailed doubting that the others' souls or spirits could possess a body materially similar to theirs.<sup>14</sup>

◇ In the semiotic terms of Roy Wagner, a Melanesianist who will quickly reveal himself to be a crucial intercessor in the theory of Amerindian perspectivism, the body belongs to the innate or spontaneous dimension of European ontology ("nature"), which is the counter-invented result of an operation of conventionalist symbolization, while the soul would be the constructed dimension, the fruit of a "differentiating" symbolization that "specifies and renders concrete the conventional world by tracing radical distinctions and concretizing the singular individuals of this world" (Wagner 1981: 42). In indigenous worlds, on the contrary,

13. The anecdote was taken from Oviedo's *History of the Indians*; it would have taken place in Hispanolia, in the inquiry undertaken in 1517 by priests of the order of St. Jerome in the colonies, and Puerto Rico, with the submergence of a young Spaniard, who was caught and then drowned by Indians. It is an argument that, moreover, demonstrates the necessity of pushing the archaeology of the human sciences back until at least the controversy of Valladolid (1550–51), the celebrated debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda on the subject of the nature of American Indians. See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (1982).

14. The old notion of the soul has been going incognito ever since it was rechristened as culture, the symbolic, mind, etc.... The theological problem of the soul of others became the philosophical puzzle of "the problem of other minds," which currently extends so far as to include neurotechnological inquiries on human consciousness, the minds of animals, the intelligence of machines (the gods have apparently transferred themselves into Intel microprocessors). In the last two cases, the question concerns whether certain animals would not, after all, have something like a soul or a consciousness—perhaps even a culture—and, reciprocally, if certain material non-autopoietic systems lacking, in other words, a true body could show themselves capable of intentionality.

the soul "is experienced as ... a manifestation of the conventional order implicit in everything" and "sums up the ways in which its possessor is similar to others, over and above the ways in which he differs from them" (Wagner 1981: 94); the body, on the contrary, belongs to the sphere of what comes from the responsibility of agents and is one of the fundamental figures of something that has to be constructed against a universal and innate ground of an "immanent humanity" (Wagner 1981: 86-9).<sup>15</sup> In short, European praxis consists in "making souls" (and differentiating cultures) on the basis of a given corporeal-material ground—nature—while indigenous praxis consists in "making bodies" (and differentiating species) on the basis of a socio-spiritual continuum, itself also given ... but in myth, as we will see.

Wagner's conceptually dense and quite original theoretical system resists didactic summary; thus we request that the reader directly engage its most elegant and realized presentation in *The Invention of Culture*. *Grosso modo*, the Wagnerian semiotic can be said to be a theory of human and nonhuman practice conceived as exhaustively consisting in the reciprocal, recursive operation of two modes of symbolization: (1) a collectivizing, conventional (or literal) symbolism where signs are organized in standardized contexts (semantic domains, formal languages, etc.) to the extent that they are opposed to a heterogeneous plane of "referents"—that is, they are seen as symbolizing something other than themselves; and (2) a differentiating, inventive (or figurative) mode in which the world of phenomena represented by conventional symbolization is understood to be constituted by "symbols representing themselves," that is, events that simultaneously manifest as symbols and referents, thereby dissolving the conventional contrast. It should be observed, first of all, that the world of referents or the "real" is defined here as a semiotic effect: what is other to a sign is another sign having the singular capacity of "representing itself." The mode of existence of actual entities qua events or occasions is a tautology. It should be stressed that the contrast between the two modes is itself the result of a conventionalist operation (and perception): the distinction between invention and convention is itself conventional, but at the same time every convention is produced through a counter-invention. The contrast is thus intrinsically recursive, especially if we understand that human cultures are fundamentally in conflict over the mode of symbolization they (conventionally) privilege as an element appropriated for action or invention, in reserving to the other the function of the "given." Cultures, human macrosystems of conventions, are distinguished by what they define as belonging to the sphere of the responsibilities of agents—the mode of the constructed—

15. Here I am myself "innovating" on Wagner, who does not raise in *The Invention of Culture* the question of the status of the body in the "differentiating" cultures.

and by what belongs (because it is counter-constructed as belonging) to the world of the given or non-constructed.

The core of any and every set of cultural conventions is a simple distinction as to what kind of contexts—the nonconventionalized ones or those of convention itself—are to be deliberately articulated in the course of human action, and what kind of contexts are to be counter-invented as “motivation” under the conventional mask of “the given” or “the innate.” Of course [...] there are only two possibilities: a people who deliberately differentiate as the form of their action will invariably counter-invent a motivating collectivity as “innate,” and a people who deliberately collectivize will counter-invent a motivating differentiation in this way. (Wagner 1981: 51)



The anthropological chiasm Lévi-Strauss opened up via the Antilles incident is in accord with two characteristics of Amazonian cosmology recently distinguished by its ethnography. First, it unexpectedly confirmed the importance of an economy of *corporeality* at the very heart of those ontologies recently redefined (in what will be seen to be a somewhat unilateral fashion) as animist.<sup>16</sup> I say “confirmed” because this was something that had already been abundantly demonstrated in the *Mythologiques*, as long as they are taken literally and thus understood as a mythic transformation of the mythic transformations that were their object. In other words, they describe, in prose wedding Cartesian rigor to Rabelaisian verve, an indigenous anthropology formulated in terms of organic fluxes, material codings, sensible multiplicities, and becomings-animal instead of in the spectral terms of our own anthropology, whose juridical-theological grisaille (the rights, duties, rules, principles, categories and moral persons conceptually formative of the discipline) simply overwhelms it.<sup>17</sup>

16. The theme of animism was recently reanimated by Philippe Descola (1992, 1996) who of course pays unstinting attention to Amazonian materials.

17. See A. Seeger, R. DaMatta and E. Viveiros de Castro, 1979 for a first formulation of the problematic of corporeality in indigenous America. Because it explicitly relied on the *Mythologiques*, this work was developed without the least connection to the theme of embodiment that would take anthropology by storm in the decades to follow. The structuralist current of Amerindian ethnology, deaf to what Deleuze and Guattari called the “at once pious and sensual” appeal to phenomenological “fleshism”—the appeal to “rotten wood,” as a reader of *The Raw and The Cooked* would say—always thought incarnation from the perspective of the culinary triangle rather than the holy Trinity.

Second, Amazonianists have also perceived certain theoretical implications of this non-marked or generic status of the virtual dimension or “soul” of existents, a chief premise of a powerful indigenous intellectual structure that is *inter alia* capable of providing a counter-description of the image drawn of it by Western anthropology and thereby capable, again, of “returning to us an image in which we are unrecognizable to ourselves.” This double, materialist-speculative twist, applied to the usual psychological and positivist representation of animism, is what we called “perspectivism,” by virtue of the analogies, as much constructed as observed, with the philosophical thesis associated with this term found in Leibniz, Nietzsche, Whitehead and Deleuze.



As various ethnographers have noted (unfortunately too often only in passing), virtually all peoples of the New World share a conception of the world as composed of a multiplicity of points of view. Every existent is a center of intentionality apprehending other existents according to their respective characteristics and powers. The presuppositions and consequences of this idea are nevertheless irreducible to the current concept of relativism that they would, at first glance, seem to evoke. They are, in fact, instead arranged on a plane orthogonal to the opposition between relativism and universalism. Such resistance on the part of Amerindian perspectivism to the terms of our epistemological debates casts suspicion on the transposability of the ontological partitions nourishing them. This is the conclusion a number of anthropologists arrived at (although for very different reasons) when asserting that the nature/culture distinction—that first article of the Constitution of anthropology, whereby it pledges allegiance to the ancient matrix of Western metaphysics—cannot be used to describe certain dimensions or domains internal to non-Occidental cosmologies without first making them the object of rigorous ethnographic critique.

In the present case, such a critique demanded the redistribution of the predicates arranged in the paradigmatic series of “nature” and “culture”: universal and particular, objective and subjective, physical and moral, the given and the instituted, necessity

and spontaneity, immanence and transcendence, body and spirit, animality and humanity, and so on. The new order of this other conceptual map led us to suggest that the term "multinaturalism" could be used to designate one of the most distinctive traits of Amerindian thought, which emerges upon its juxtaposition with modern, multiculturalist cosmologies: where the latter rest on the mutual implication between the unicity of nature and the multiplicity of cultures—the first being guaranteed by the objective universality of bodies and substance, and the second engendered by the subjective particularity of minds and signifiers (cf. Ingold 1991)—the Amerindian conception presupposes, on the contrary, a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies. "Culture" or subject as the form of the universal, and "nature" or object as the particular.

The ethnography of indigenous America is replete with references to a cosmopolitical theory describing a universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents, human or otherwise—gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artifacts as well—equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions: with the same kind of soul. This interspecific resemblance includes, to put it a bit performatively, the same mode of apperception: animals and other nonhumans having a soul "see themselves as persons" and therefore "are persons": intentional, double-sided (visible and invisible) objects constituted by social relations and existing under a double, at once reflexive and reciprocal—which is to say collective—pronominal mode. What these persons see and thus are as persons, however, constitutes the very philosophical problem posed by and for indigenous thought.

The resemblance between souls, however, does not entail that what they express or perceive is likewise shared. The way humans see animals, spirits and other actants in the cosmos is profoundly different from how these beings both see them and see themselves. Typically, and this tautology is something like the degree zero of perspectivism, humans will, under normal conditions, see humans as humans and animals as animals (in the case of spirits, seeing these normally invisible beings is a sure indication that the conditions are not normal: sickness, trance and other "altered states"). Predatory animals and spirits, for their part, see

humans as prey, while prey see humans as spirits or predators. "The human being sees himself as what he is. The loon, the snake, the jaguar, and The Mother of Smallpox, however, see him as a tapir or a pecari to be killed," remarks Baer apropos the Matsigenka of Amazonian Peru (Baer 1994). In seeing *us* as nonhumans, animals and spirits regard themselves (their own species) as human: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their houses or villages, and apprehend their behavior and characteristics through a cultural form: they perceive their food as human food—jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the worms in rotten meat as grilled fish—their corporeal attributes (coats, feathers, claws, beaks) as finery or cultural instruments, and they even organize their social systems in the same way as human institutions, with chiefs, shamans, exogamous moieties and rituals.

Some precisions prove necessary. Perspectivism is only rarely applied to all animals (even as it encompasses nearly all other beings, and at the very least the dead), as the species it seems most frequently to involve are the big predators and scavengers, like jaguars, anacondas, vultures and harpies, and the typical prey of humans—wild boar, monkeys, fish, deer and tapirs. In fact, one of the fundamental aspects of perspectivist inversions concerns the relative, relational status of predator and prey. The Amazonian metaphysics of predation is a pragmatic and theoretical context highly favorable to perspectivism. That said, there is scarcely an existent that could not be defined in terms of its relative position on a scale of predatory power.

For if all existents are not necessarily *de facto* persons, the fundamental point is that there is *de jure* nothing to prevent any species or mode of being from having that status. The problem, in sum, is not one of taxonomy, classification or so-called ethno-science.<sup>18</sup> All animals and cosmic constituents are intensively and virtually persons, because all of them, no matter which, can reveal themselves to be (transform into) a person. This is not a simple logical possibility but an ontological potentiality. Personhood

18. Compare with what Lienhardt says on the heteroclit collection of species, entities and phenomena that served the clan-divinities of the Dinka of Sudan. "The Dinka have no theory about the principle upon which some species are included among clan-divinities, and some omitted. There is no reason, in their thought, why anything might not be the divinity of some clan" (1961: 110).

and perspectiveness—the capacity to occupy a point of view—is a question of degree, context and position rather than a property distinct to specific species. Certain nonhumans actualize this potential more fully than others, and some, moreover, manifest it with a superior intensity than our species and are, in this sense, “more human than humans” (see Irving 1960). Furthermore, the question possesses an essentially *a posteriori* quality. The possibility of a previously insignificant being revealing itself (to a dreamer, sick person or shaman) as a prosopomorphic agent capable of affecting human affairs always remains open; where the personhood of being is concerned, “personal” experience is more decisive than whatever cosmological dogma.

If nothing prevents an existent from being conceived of as a person—as an aspect, that is, of a biosocial multiplicity—nothing else prevents another human collective from *not* being considered one. This is, moreover, the rule. The strange generosity that makes peoples like Amazonians see humans concealed under the most improbable forms or, rather, affirm that even the most unlikely beings are capable of seeing themselves as humans is the double of the well-known ethnocentrism that leads these same groups to deny humanity to their fellow men [*congénères*] and even (or above all) to their closest geographical or historical cousins. In contrast with the courageously disenchanting maturity of the old Europeans and their longstanding resignation to the cosmic solipsism of the human condition (a bitter pill for them, however sweetened it is by the consolation of intraspecific intersubjectivity), it is as if our exotic people perpetually oscillate between two infantile narcissisms: one of small differences between fellow people(s) [*congénères*] that often resemble each other too much, and another of big resemblances between entirely different species. We see how the other(s) can never win: at once ethnocentric and animist, they are inevitably immoderate, whether by omission or commission.

The fact that the condition of the person (whose universal aperceptive form is human) could be “extended” to other species while “denied” to other collectives of our own immediately suggests that the concept of the person—a center of intentionality constituted by a difference of internal potential—is anterior and logically superior to the concept of the human. Humanity is in

the position of the common denominator, the reflexive mode of the collective, and is as such derived in relation to the primary positions of predator and prey, which necessarily implicates other collectives and personal multiplicities in a situation of perspectival multiplicity.<sup>19</sup> This interspecific resemblance or kinship arises from the deliberate, socially produced suspension of a given predatory difference and does not precede it. This is precisely what Amerindian kinship consists of: “reproduction” as *the intensive stabilization and/or deliberate non-achievement of predation*, in the fashion of the celebrated Batesonian (or Balinese) intensive plateau that so inspired Deleuze and Guattari. It is not by chance that in another text of Lévi-Strauss’ that deals with cannibalism, this idea of identity-by-subtraction receives a formulation perfectly befitting Amerindian perspectivism:

[T]he problem of cannibalism . . . would not be a search for the “why?” of the custom, but, on the contrary, for the “how?” of the emergence of this lower limit of predation by which, perhaps, we are brought back to social life. (L.-S. 1987b: 113; see also L.-S. 1981: 690)

This is nothing more than an application of the classic structuralist precept that “resemblance has no reality in itself; it is only a particular instance of difference, that in which difference tends toward zero” (L.-S. 1981: 38).<sup>20</sup> Everything hinges on the verb “to tend,” since, as Lévi-Strauss observes, difference “is never completely annulled.” We could even say that it only blooms to its full conceptual power when it becomes as slight as can be: like the difference between twins, as an Amerindian philosopher might say.

19. “Human” is a term designating a relation, not a substance. Primitive peoples’ celebrated designations of themselves as “the human beings” and “the true men” seem to function pragmatically, if not syntactically, less as *substantives* than as *pronouns* marking the subjective position of the speaker. It is for this reason that the indigenous categories of collective identity possess this great contextual variability so characteristic of pronouns, marking the self/other contrast through the immediate kinship of the “I” with all other humans, or, as we have seen, with all other beings endowed with consciousness. Their sedimentation as “ethnonyms” seems to be mostly an artifact produced through interactions with the ethnographer.

20. The precept is classic, but few of the so-called “structuralists” truly understood how to push the idea to its logical conclusion and thus beyond itself. Might that be because they would be pulled with it into the orbit of *Difference and Repetition*?

The notion that actual nonhumans possess an invisible prosopomorphic side is a fundamental supposition of several dimensions of indigenous practice, but it is only foregrounded in the particular context of shamanism. Amerindian shamanism could be defined as the authorization of certain individuals to cross the corporeal barriers between species, adopt an exospecific subjective perspective, and administer the relations between those species and humans. By seeing nonhuman beings as they see themselves (again as humans), shamans become capable of playing the role of active interlocutors in the trans-specific dialogue and, even more importantly, of returning from their travels to recount them; something the “laity” can only do with difficulty. This encounter or exchange of perspectives is not only a dangerous process but a political art: diplomacy. If Western relativism has multiculturalism as its public politics, Amerindian shamanic perspectivism has multinaturalism as its cosmic politics.

Shamanism is a mode of action entailing a mode of knowledge, or, rather, a certain ideal of knowledge. In certain respects, this ideal is diametrically opposed to the objectivist epistemology encouraged by Western modernity. The latter’s telos is provided by the category of the object: to know is to objectify by distinguishing between what is intrinsic to the object and what instead belongs to the knowing subject, which has been inevitably and illegitimately projected onto the object. To know is thus to desubjectify, to render explicit the part of the subject present in the object in order to reduce it to an ideal minimum (and/or to amplify it with a view to obtaining spectacular critical effects). Subjects, just like objects, are regarded as the results of a process of objectification: the subject constitutes or recognizes itself in the object it produces, and knows itself objectively when it succeeds in seeing itself “from the outside” as a thing. Our epistemological game, then, is objectification; what has not been objectified simply remains abstract or unreal. The form of the Other is the thing.

Amerindian shamanism is guided by the inverse ideal: to know is to “personify,” to take the point of view of what should be known or, rather, *the one* whom should be known. The key is

to know, in Guimarães Rosa’s phrase, “the who of things,” without which there would be no way to respond intelligently to the question of “why.” The form of the Other is the person. We could also say, to utilize a vocabulary currently in vogue, that shamanic personification or subjectivation reflects a propensity to universalize the “intentional attitude” accorded so much value by certain modern philosophers of mind (or, more accurately, philosophers of *modern* mind). To be more precise, since the Indians are perfectly capable of adopting “physical” and “functional” attitudes *sensu* Dennett (1978) in everyday life, we will say that here we are faced with an epistemological ideal that, far from seeking to reduce “ambient intentionality” to its zero degree in order to attain an absolutely objective representation of the world, instead makes the opposite wager: true knowledge aims to reveal a maximum of intentionality through a systematic and deliberate abduction of agency. To what we said above about shamanism being a *political* art we can now add that it is a political *art*.<sup>21</sup> For the good shamanic interpretation succeeds in seeing each event as being, in truth, an *action*, an expression of intentional states or predicates of an agent. Interpretive success, then, is directly proportional to the successful attribution of intentional order to an object or *noeme*.<sup>22</sup> An entity or state of things not prone to subjectivation, which is to say the actualization of its social relation with the one who knows it, is shamanically insignificant—in that case, it is just an epistemic residue or impersonal factor resistant to precise knowledge. Our objectivist epistemology, there is no need to recall, proceeds in the opposite direction, conceiving the intentional attitude as a convenient fiction adopted when the aimed-for object is too complex to be decomposed into elementary physical

21. The relation between artistic experience and the process of the “abduction of agency” was analyzed by Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency* (1998).

22. I am referring here to Dennett’s notion of the n-ordinality of intentional systems. A second-order intentional system is one in which the observer ascribes not only (as in the first order) beliefs, desires and other intentions to the object but, additionally, beliefs, etc. about other beliefs (etc.). The standard cognitive thesis holds that only humans exhibit second- or higher-order intentionality. The shamanistic “principle of the abduction of a maximum agency” runs afoul of the creed of physicalist psychology: “Psychologists have often appealed to a principle known as ‘Lloyd Morgan’s Caution of Parsimony,’ which can be viewed as a special case of Occam’s Razor: it is the principle that one should attribute to an organism as little intelligence or consciousness or rationality or mind as will suffice to account for its behavior” (Dennett 1978: 274).

processes. An exhaustive scientific explanation of the world, it is thought, should be capable of reducing every object to a chain of causal events, and these, in turn, to materially dense interactions (through, primarily, action at a distance).

Thus if a subject is an insufficiently analyzed object in the modern naturalist world, the Amerindian epistemological convention follows the inverse principle, which is that an object is an insufficiently interpreted subject. One must know how to personify, because one must personify in order to know. The object of the interpretation is the counter-interpretation of the object.<sup>23</sup> The latter idea should perhaps be developed into its full intentional form—the form of a mind, an animal under a human face—having at least a demonstrable relation with a subject, conceived as something that exists “in the neighborhood” of an agent (see Gell 1998).

Where this second option is concerned, the idea that non-human agents perceive themselves and their behavior under a human form plays a crucial role. The translation of “culture” in the worlds of extrahuman subjectivities has for its corollary the redefinition of several natural objects and events as indexes from which social agency can be inferred. The most common case is the transformation of something that humans regard as a brute fact into another species’ artifact or civilized behavior: what we call blood is beer for a jaguar, what we take for a pool of mud, tapirs experience as a grand ceremonial house, and so on. Such artifacts are ontologically ambiguous: they are objects, but they necessarily indicate a subject since they are like frozen actions or material incarnations of a nonmaterial intentionality. What one side calls nature, then, very often turns out to be culture for the other.

Here we have an indigenous lesson anthropology could benefit from heeding. The differential distribution of the given and the constructed must not be taken for an anodyne exchange, a simple change of signs that leaves the terms of the problem intact. There is “all the difference off/in the world” (Wagner 1981: 51) between a world that experiences the primordial as bare transcendence

23. As Marilyn Strathern observes of an epistemological regime similar to that of Amerindians: “The same convention requires that the objects of interpretation—human or not—become understood as other persons; indeed, the very act of interpretation presupposes the personhood of what is being interpreted. [...] What one thus encounters in making interpretations are always counter-interpretations” (1991: 23).

and pure anti-anthropocentric alterity—as the nonconstructed and non-instituted opposed to all custom and discourse<sup>24</sup>—and a world of immanent humanity, where the primordial assumes a human form. This anthropomorphic presupposition of the indigenous world is radically opposed to the persistent anthropocentric effort in Western philosophies (some of the most radical included) to “construct” the human as the nongiven, as the very being of the nongiven (Sloterdijk 2000). We should nevertheless stress, against fantasies of the narcissistic paradises of exotic peoples (a.k.a. Disney anthropology), that this presupposition renders the indigenous world neither more familiar nor more comforting. When everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing.

So there really are more things in heaven and earth than in our anthropological dream. To describe this multiverse, where every difference is political (because every relation is “social”), as though it were an illusory version of our universe—to *unify* them by reducing the inventions of the first to the conventions of the second—would be to decide for a simplistic and politically puerile conception of their relationship. Such facile explanations end up engendering every sort of complication, since the cost of this ersatz ontological monism is its inflationary proliferation of epistemological dualisms—emic and etic, metaphoric and literal, conscious and unconscious, representation and reality, illusion and truth (I could go on...). Those dualisms are dubious not because all such conceptual dichotomies are in principle pernicious but because these in particular require, if they are to unify (any) two worlds, discriminating between their respective inhabitants. Every Great Divider is a mononaturalist.

24. “Yet nature is different from man: it is not instituted by him and is opposed to custom, to discourse. Nature is the primordial—that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted” (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 3-4).



## Chapter 3

### Multinaturalism

“We moderns possess the concept but have lost sight of the plane of immanence....” (D. G. 1994: 104). All the foregoing is merely the development of the founding intuition, deductively effectuated by indigenous theoretical practice, of the mythology of the continent, which concerns a milieu that can rightly be called pre-historical (in the sense of the celebrated absolute past: the past that has never been present and which therefore is never past, while the present never ceases to pass), and that is defined by the ontological impenetrability of all the “insistents” populating and constituting this milieu—the templates and standards of actual existents.

As the *Mythologiques* teach us, the narrativization of the indigenous plane of immanence articulates in a privileged way the causes and consequences of speciation—the assumption of a specific corporeality—by the personae or actants therein, all of whom are conceived as sharing a general unstable condition in which the aspects of humans and nonhumans are inextricably enmeshed:

I would like to ask a simple question. What is a myth?  
It's the very opposite of a simple question [...]. If you were to ask an American Indian, he would most likely tell you that it is a story of the time before men and animals became distinct beings. This definition seems very profound to me. (L.-S. and Éribon: 1991: 139)

In fact, the definition is profound, even if showing this requires taking a slightly different direction than the one Lévi-Strauss had in mind in his response. Mythic discourse registers the movement

by which the present state of things is actualized from a virtual, precosmological condition that is perfectly transparent—a chaosmos where the corporeal and spiritual dimensions of beings do not yet conceal each other. Far from evincing the primordial identification between humans and nonhumans commonly ascribed to it, this precosmos is traversed by an infinite difference (even if, or because, it is internal to each person or agent) contrary to the finite and external differences constituting the actual world's species and qualities. Whence the regime of qualitative multiplicity proper to myth: the question, for example, of whether the mythic jaguar is a block of human affects having the form of a jaguar or a block of human affects having a human form is strictly undecidable, as mythic "metamorphosis" is an event, a change on the spot: an intensive superposition of heterogeneous states rather than an extensive transposition of homogenous states. Myth is not history because metamorphosis is not a process, was not yet a process and will never be a process. Metamorphosis is both anterior and external to the process of process—it is a figure (a figuration) of becoming.

The general line traced by mythic discourse thus describes the instantaneous sorting of the precosmological flux of indiscernibility that occurs when it enters the cosmological process. Following that, the feline and human dimensions of jaguars (and of humans) will alternately function as figure and potential ground for each other. The original transparency or infinitely bifurcated *complicatio* gets explicated in the invisibility (of human souls and animal spirits) and opacity (of human bodies and animal somatic "garb"<sup>25</sup>) that mark the constitution of all mundane beings. This invisibility and opacity are, however, relative and reversible, even as the ground of virtuality is indestructible or inexhaustible; the great indigenous rituals of the recreation of the world are precisely *dispositifs* for the counter-effectuation of this indestructible ground.

The differences coming into effect within myths are, again, infinite and internal, contrary to the external, finite differences between species. What defines the agents and patients of mythic

25. The motif of perspectivism is nearly always accompanied by the idea that the visible form of each species is a simple envelope (a "clothing") hiding an internal human form that is only accessible, as we have seen, to the gaze of members of the same species, or certain perspectival "commutators," like shamans.

events is their intrinsic capacity to be something else. In this sense, each persona infinitely differs from itself, given that it is initially supposed by mythic discourse only in order to be replaced, which is to say transformed. Such "self-" difference is the characteristic property of the notion of "spirit," which is why all mythic beings are conceived of as spirits (and as shamans), and every finite mode or actual existent, reciprocally, can manifest as (for it was) a spirit when its reason to be is recounted in myth. The supposed lack of differentiation between mythic subjects is a function of their being constitutively irreducible to essences or fixed identities, whether generic, specific, or even individual.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, myth proposes an ontological regime ordered by a fluent intensive difference bearing on each of the points of a heterogeneous continuum, where transformation is anterior to form, relations superior to terms, and intervals interior to being. Each mythic subject, being a pure virtuality, "was already previously" what it "would be next" and this is why it is not something actually determined. The extensive differences, moreover, introduced by post-mythic speciation (*sensu lato*)—the passage from the continuous to the discrete constituting the grand (my)theme of structural anthropology—is crystallized in molar blocks of infinitely internal identity (each species is internally homogeneous, and its members are equally and indifferently representatives of the species as such).<sup>27</sup> These blocks are separated by external intervals that are quantifiable and measurable, since differences between species are finite systems for the correlation, proportioning, and permutation of characteristics of the same order and same nature.

26. I have in mind the detotalized, "disorganized" bodies that roam about Amerindian myths: the detachable penises and personified anuses, the rolling heads and characters cut into pieces, the eyes transposed from anteaters to jaguars and *vice versa*, etc.

27. As we know, myths contain various moments where this convention is "relativized" (in the sense of Wagner's 1981 book) since, given that infinite identity does not exist, difference is never entirely annulled. See the humorous example from *The Origin of Table Manners* on the subject of poorly matched spouses: "What do the myths proclaim? That it is wicked and dangerous to confuse physical differences between women with the specific differences separating animals from humans, or animals from each other.... [A] s human beings, women, whether beautiful or ugly, all deserve to obtain husbands. [...] When contrasted in the mass with animal wives, human wives are all equally valid; but if the arrature of the myth is reversed, it cannot but reveal a mysterious fact that society tries to ignore: all human females are not equal, for nothing can prevent them from being different from each other in their animal essence, which means that they are not all equally desirable to prospective husbands" (L.-S. 1979: 76).

The heterogeneous continuum of the precosmological world thus gives way to a discrete, homogeneous space in whose terms each being is only what it is, and is so only because it is not what it is not. But spirits are the proof that all virtualities have not necessarily been actualized, and that the turbulent mythic flux continues to rumble beneath the apparent discontinuities between types and species.

Amerindian perspectivism, then, finds in myth a geometrical locus where the difference between points of view is at once annulled and exacerbated. In this absolute discourse, each kind of being appears to other beings as it appears to itself—as human—even as it already acts by manifesting its distinct and definitive animal, plant, or spirit nature.<sup>28</sup> Myth, the universal point of flight of perspectivism, speaks of a state of being where bodies and names, souls and actions, egos and others are interpenetrated, immersed in one and the same presubjective and preobjective milieu.

The aim of mythology is precisely to recount the “end” of this “milieu”; in other words, to describe “the passage from Nature to Culture,” the theme to which Lévi-Strauss attributed a central role in Amerindian mythology. And contrary to what others have said, this was not without reason; it would only be necessary to specify that the centrality of this passage by no means excludes its profound ambivalence—the *double sense* (in more than one sense) it has in indigenous thought, as becomes evident the farther one advances through the *Mythologiques*. It is likewise important to emphasize that what results from this passage is not exactly what has been imagined. The passage is not a process by which the human is differentiated from the animal, as the evolutionist Occidental vulgate would have it. *The common condition of humans and animals is not animality but humanity.* The great mythic division shows less culture distinguished from nature than nature estranged from itself by culture: the myths recount how animals lost certain attributes humans inherited or conserved. Nonhumans are ex-humans—and not humans are ex-nonhumans. So where our popular anthropology regards humanity as standing upon animal foundations ordinarily occluded by culture—having

28. “No doubt, in mythic times, humans were indistinguishable from animals, but between the non-differentiated beings who were to give birth to mankind on the one hand and the animal kingdom on the other, certain qualitative relationships pre-existed, anticipating specific characteristics that were still in a latent state” (L.-S. 1981: 588).

once been entirely animal, we remain, at bottom, animals—indigenous thought instead concludes that having formerly been human, animals and other cosmic existents continue to be so, even if in a way scarcely obvious to us.<sup>29</sup>



The more general question raised for us, then, is why the humanity of each species of existent is subjectively evident (and at the same time highly problematic) and objectively non-evident (while at the same time obstinately affirmed). Why is it that animals see themselves as humans? Precisely because we humans see them as animals, while seeing ourselves as humans. Peccaries cannot see themselves as peccaries (or, who knows, speculate on the fact that humans and other beings are peccaries underneath the garb specific to them) because this is the way they are viewed by humans. If humans regard themselves as humans and are seen as nonhumans, as animals or spirits, by nonhumans, then animals should necessarily see themselves as humans. What perspectivism affirms, when all is said and done, is not so much that animals are at bottom like humans but the idea that as humans, they are at bottom something else—they are, in the end, the “bottom” itself of something, its other side; they are different from themselves. Neither animism, which would affirm a substantial or analogic resemblance between animals and humans, nor totemism—which would affirm a formal or homological resemblance between intrahuman and interanimal differences—perspectivism affirms an intensive difference that places human/nonhuman difference *within each existent*. Each being finds itself separated from itself, and becomes similar to others only through both the double subtractive condition common to them all and a strict complementarity that obtains between any two of them; for if every mode of existent is human for itself, none of them are human to each other such that humanity is reciprocally reflexive (jaguars are humans

29. The revelation of this ordinarily hidden side of beings (which is why it is conceived in different ways as “more true” than its apparent side) is intimately associated with violence in both intellectual traditions: the animality of humanity, for us, and the humanity of the animal, for the Amerindians, are only rarely actualized without destructive consequences. The Cubeo of the Northwest Amazon say that “the ferociousness of the jaguar has a human origin” (Irving Goldman).

to other jaguars, peccaries see each other as humans, etc.), even while it can never be mutual (as soon as the jaguar is human, the peccary ceases to be one and vice versa).<sup>30</sup> Such is, in the last analysis, what “soul” means here. If everything and everyone has a soul, nothing and no one coincides with itself. If everything and everyone can be human, then nothing and no one is human in a clear and distinct fashion. This “background cosmic humanity” renders the humanity of form or figure problematic. The “ground” constantly threatens to swallow the figure.

But if nonhumans are persons who see themselves as persons, why then do they not view all other kinds of cosmic persons as the latter view themselves? If the cosmos is saturated with humanity, why is this metaphysical ether opaque, or why is it, at best, like a two-way mirror, returning an image of the human from only one of its sides? These questions, as we anticipated apropos the Antilles incident, grant us access to the Amerindian concept of the body. They also make it possible to pass from the quasi-epistemological notion of perspectivism to a veritable ontological one—multinaturalism.

The idea of a world that comprises a multiplicity of subjective positions immediately evokes the notion of relativism. Frequent mention, both direct and indirect, is made of it in descriptions of Amerindian cosmologies. We will take, almost at random, the conclusion of Kaj Arhem, an ethnographer of the Makuna. After describing the perspectival universe of this Northwest Amazonian people in minute detail, he concludes that the idea of a multiplicity of perspectives on reality entails, in the case of the Makuna, that “every perspective is equally valid and true” and “a true and correct representation of the world does not exist” (1993: 124).

This is no doubt correct, but only in a certain sense. There is a high probability that the Makuna would say, on the contrary, that where humans are concerned, there *is* a true and accurate representation of the world. If a human begins to see, as a vulture would, the worms infesting a cadaver as grilled fish, he will draw the following conclusion: vultures have stolen his soul, he himself is in the course of being transformed into one, and he and his kin will cease being human to each other. In short, he is gravely ill, or

30. We can thus see that if for us “man is a wolf to man,” for the Indians, the wolf can be man for wolves—with the proviso that man and wolf cannot be man (or wolf) simultaneously.

even dead. In other words (but this amounts to the same thing), he is en route to becoming a shaman. Every precaution, then, has to be taken to keep perspectives separate from each other on account of their incompatibility. Only shamans, who enjoy a kind of double citizenship in regard to their species (as well as to their status as living or dead), can make them communicate—and this only under special, highly controlled conditions.<sup>31</sup>

But an important question remains. Does Amerindian perspectivist theory in fact postulate a plurality of *representations* of the world? It will suffice to consider the testimony of ethnographers in order to perceive that the situation is exactly the inverse: all beings see (“represent”) the world *in the same way*; what changes is *the world they see*. Animals rely on the same “categories” and “values” as humans: their worlds revolve around hunting, fishing, food, fermented beverages, cross-cousins, war, initiation rites, shamans, chiefs, spirits.... If the moon, serpents, and jaguars see humans as tapirs or peccaries, this is because, just like us, they eat tapirs and peccaries (human food par excellence). Things could not be otherwise, since nonhumans, being humans in their own domain, see things as humans do—like we humans see them in our domain. But the things *they see* when they see them *like we do* are *different*: what we take for blood, jaguars see as beer; the souls of the dead find a rotten cadaver where we do fermented manioc; what humans perceive as a mud puddle becomes a grand ceremonial house when viewed by tapirs.

At first glance, this idea would appear to be somewhat counter-intuitive, seeming to unceasingly transform into its opposite, like the multistable objects of psychophysics.<sup>32</sup> Gerald Weiss, for example, describes the world of the Peruvian Amazonian Ashakinka people as “a world of relative semblances, where different kinds of beings see the same things differently” (Weiss 1972: 170). Once again, this is true, but in a different way than intended. What Weiss “does not see” is precisely the fact that different types of beings see the same things differently is merely a consequence of

31. To paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, we could say that the sign of a first-rank shamanic intelligence is the capacity to simultaneously hold two incompatible perspectives.

32. The Necker cube is the perfect example, since its ambiguity hinges on an oscillating perspective. Amazonian mythology contains numerous cases of characters that, when encountered by a human, change rapidly from one form to another—from human (seductive) to animal (terrifying).

the fact that different types of beings see different things in the same way. What, after all, counts as “the same thing?” And in relation to who, which species, and in what way?

Cultural relativism, which is a multiculturalism, presumes a diversity of partial, subjective representations bearing on an external nature, unitary and whole, that itself is indifferent to representation. Amerindians propose the inverse: on the one hand, a purely pronominal representative unit—the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as “activated” or “agencied” by a point of view<sup>33</sup>—and, on the other, a real or objective radical diversity. Perspectivism is a multinaturalism, since a perspective is not a representation.

A perspective is not a representation because representations are properties of mind, whereas a *point of view is in the body*. The capacity to occupy a point of view is doubtlessly a power of the soul, and nonhumans are subjects to the extent to which they have (or are) a mind; but the difference between points of view—and a point of view is nothing but a difference—is not in the soul. The latter, being formally identical across all species, perceive the same thing everywhere. The difference, then, must lie in the specificity of the body.

Animals perceive in the same way as us but perceive different things than we do, because their bodies are different than ours. I do not mean by this physiological differences—Amerindians recognize a basic uniformity of bodies—but the affects, or strengths and weakness, that render each species of the body singular: what it eats, its way of moving or communicating, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary, timid or fierce, and so on. Corporeal morphology is a powerful sign of these differences, although it can be quite deceiving; the human figure, for instance, can conceal a jaguar-affection. What we are calling “body,” then, is not the specific physiology or characteristic anatomy of something but an ensemble of ways or modes of being that constitutes a *habitus*, ethos, or ethogram. Lying between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms

33. The point of view creates not its object, as Saussure would say, but rather the subject itself. “Such is the basis of perspectivism, which does not mean a dependence in respect to a pre-given or defined subject; to the contrary, a subject will be what comes to the point of view, or rather what remains in the point of view” (D. 1993: 19).

is a middle, axial plane that is the body qua bundle of affects and capacities, and that is at the origin of perspectivism. Far from being the spiritual essentialism of relativism, perspectivism is a corporeal mannerism.



Multinaturalism does not suppose a Thing-in-Itself partially apprehended through categories of understanding proper to each species. We should not think that Indians imagine that there exists a something=X, something that humans, for example, would see as blood and jaguars as beer. What exists in multinature are not such self-identical entities differently perceived but immediately relational multiplicities of the type blood/beer. There exists, if you will, only the limit between blood and beer, the border by which these two “affinal” substances communicate and diverge.<sup>34</sup> Finally, there is no X that would be blood to one species and beer to another; just a “blood/beer” that from the very start is one of the characteristic singularities or affections of the human/jaguar. The resemblance Amazonians frequently draw between humans and jaguars, which is that both of them drink “beer,” is only made so that what creates the difference between humans and jaguars can be better perceived. “One is either in one language or another—there is no more a background-language than a background-world” (Jullien 2008, 135). In effect, one is *either* in the blood *or* in the beer, with no one drinking a drink-in-itself. But every beer has a background-taste of blood and vice-versa.

We are beginning to be able to understand how *Amerindian perspectivism* raises the problem of translation, and thus how to address the problem of translating perspectivism into the onto-semiotic terms of Occidental anthropology. In this way, the possession of similar souls implies the possession of analogous concepts on the part of all existents. What changes from one species of existent to another is therefore body and soul as well as the referents of these concepts: the body is the site and instrument of the referential disjunction between the “discourses” (the semiograms) of each species. Amerindian perspectivism’s problem is thus not

34. Etymologically, the affine is he who is situated *ad-finis*, whose domain borders on mine. Affines are those who communicate by borders, who hold “in common” only what separates them.

to find the referent common to two different representations (the Venus behind the morning star and the evening star) but instead to circumvent the equivocation that consists in imagining that a jaguar saying “manioc beer” is referring to the same thing as us simply because he means the same thing as us. In other words, perspectivism presumes an epistemology that remains constant, and variable ontologies. The same “representations,” but different objects. One meaning, multiple referents. The goal of perspectivist translation—which is one of the principle tasks of shamans—is therefore not to find in human conceptual language a *synonym* (a co-referential representation) for the representations that other species employ to indicate the same thing “out there”; rather, the objective is to not lose sight of the difference concealed by the deceiving *homonyms* that connect/separate our language from those of other species. If Western anthropology is founded on the principle of interpretive charity (goodwill and tolerance as what distinguishes the thinker from the rest of humanity in its exasperation with the other), which affirms a natural synonymy between human cultures, Amerindian alter-anthropology contrarily affirms a counter-natural homonymy between living species that is at the source of all kinds of fatal equivocations. (The Amerindian principle of precaution: a world entirely composed of living foci of intentionality necessarily comes with a large dose of bad intentions.)

In the end, the concept of multinaturalism is not a simple repetition of anthropological multiculturalism. Two very different conjugations of the multiple are at stake. Multiplicity can be taken as a kind of plurality, as happens in invocations of the “the multiplicity of cultures” of beautiful cultural diversity. Or, on the contrary, multiplicity can be the multiplicity *in* culture, or culture *as* multiplicity. This second sense is what interests us. The notion of multiculturalism becomes useful here on account of its paradoxical character. Our macroconcept of nature fails to acknowledge veritable plurality, which spontaneously forces us to register the ontological solecism contained in the idea of “several natures” and thus the corrective displacement it imposes. Paraphrasing a formula of Deleuze’s on relativism (1993: 21), we could say that Amazonian multinaturalism affirms not so much a variety of natures as the naturalness of variation—variation *as* nature. The

inversion of the Occidental formula of multiculturalism bears not simply on its constitutive terms—nature and culture—as they are mutually determined by their respective functions of unity and diversity, but also on the values accorded to term and function themselves. Anthropological readers will recognize here, of course, Lévi-Strauss’ canonical formula (1963e[1955]: 228): perspectivist multinaturalism is a transformation, through its double twist, of Occidental multiculturalism, and signals the crossing of a historico-semiotic threshold of translatability and equivocation—a threshold, precisely, of perspectival transformation.<sup>35</sup>

35. For “the crossing of a threshold” in Lévi-Strauss, see 2001: 29; see also the essential commentary on this by Mauro Almeida (2008).