

CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS AND THE MYTH ANAMORPHOSES

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Abstract: The article intends to demonstrate that, when building his science, Claude Lévi-Strauss abandons the categories used by the traditional studies of the myth and creates singular epistemological tools, suggested by the music, by the natural science and by the plastic arts. These tools, which we can denominate aesthetic operators, light up, in an exemplary way, the dissolution process that suffers the mythical matter when transforming in the time and in the space. When establishing that new form of thinking, the myth, that reconciles the sensitive experience with the intelligible, Lévi-Strauss proposes to overcome the permanent dichotomy between knowing archaic and modern, between magical and scientific thought, between magic and Science.

Keywords: Myth; Mythical thought; Transformations; Anamorphosis; *Mythologiques*.

Resumen: El artículo pretende demostrar que, al construir su ciencia, Claude Lévi-Strauss se aleja de las categorías utilizadas por los estudios de mitos tradicionales y crea herramientas epistemológicas únicas, sugeridas por la música, las ciencias naturales y las artes plásticas. Estas herramientas, que podemos llamar operadores estéticos, iluminan de manera ejemplar el proceso de disolución que sufre la materia mítica al transformarse en el tiempo y el espacio. Al establecer esta nueva forma de pensar el mito, que concilia la experiencia sensible con lo inteligible, Lévi-Strauss propone superar la dicotomía permanente entre conocimiento arcaico y moderno, entre pensamiento mágico y científico, entre magia y ciencia.

Palabras-claves: Mito, Pensamiento Mitológico, Transformaciones, Anamorfosis, *Mythologiques*.

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Résumé: L'article entend démontrer qu'en construisant sa science, Claude Lévi-Strauss s'éloigne des catégories utilisées par les mythes traditionnels et crée des instruments épistémologiques uniques, suggérés par la musique, les sciences naturelles et les arts plastiques. Ces instruments, que l'on peut nommer d'opérateurs esthétiques, éclairent de manière exemplaire le processus de dissolution subi par la matière mythique en se transformant dans le temps et dans l'espace. En établissant cette nouvelle façon de penser le mythe, qui réconcilie l'expérience sensible avec l'intelligible, Lévi-Strauss propose de dépasser la dichotomie permanente entre savoir archaïque et moderne, entre pensée magique et scientifique, entre magie et science.

Mots-clés : Mythe ; Pensée Mythologique ; Transformation ; Anamorphose ; Mythologiques.

Resumo: O artigo pretende demonstrar que, ao construir sua ciência, Claude Lévi-Strauss afasta-se das categorias utilizadas pelos estudos tradicionais do mito e cria singulares ferramentas epistemológicas, sugeridas pela música, pelas ciências naturais, e pelas artes plásticas. Essas ferramentas, que podemos denominar operadores estéticos, iluminam, de forma exemplar, o processo de dissolução que sofre a matéria mítica ao transformar-se no tempo e no espaço. Ao estabelecer essa nova forma de pensar o mito, que reconcilia a experiência sensível com a inteligível, Lévi-Strauss propõe a superação da permanente dicotomia entre saber arcaico e moderno, entre pensamento mágico e científico, entre magia e ciência.

Palavras-chave: Mito; Pensamento Mítico; Transformações; Anamorfoses; Mythologiques.

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We, therefore, accept the esthete qualifier, insofar as we believe that the ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to constitute the man, but to dissolve him (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1962, p. 326. Own translation)¹.

This statement by Claude Lévi-Strauss, inserted in a famous controversy between him and Jean-Paul Sartre, brings into play the controversial structuralist conception of the disappearance of the subject and reaffirms, once again, the profoundly anti-Cartesian vocation of his thought². So rhetorical in appearance, this phrase echoes profoundly in his work and extends over all fields to which he aimed his intellectual curiosity. It can even be said, without fear of contradiction, that what defines Lévi-Strauss's science as a whole is this image of dissolution, which permeates all his objects of analysis. If the structure is permanent, everything else fades and changes men, myths, times, cities, kinship systems and so on...

To examine this question more closely, the analysis of the myth that he carried out in the four volumes of "Mythologiques" as well as in "Voie des masques", "La potière jalouse" and in "Histoire de Lynx"³, offers a particular interest, insofar as it inverts the perspective constructed by the science of the *myth* – that is, to think it with the *logos* categories – and start thinking like the myth itself. Indeed, the traditional science of the *myth* usually starts its reports from an *organizing principle's narrative*, identified at the *beginning of time*; that is, at the very moment of the outbreak of the universe: overcoming the primordial chaos, before all creation, inaugurating the cosmos. This *organizing principle* can be assimilated to a breath, a word, a demiurge.

Harmonious par excellence, the cosmos, being a divine work, is sanctified in its own origin and from there, as Mircea Eliade assures, everything that is perfect, full, and/

1 Original: « Nous acceptons donc le qualificatif d'esthète, pour autant que nous croyons que le but dernier des sciences humaines n'est pas de constituer l'homme, mais de le dissoudre ».

2 See about it: LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1962, p. 324-357; chapter « Histoire et dialectique ».

3 T. N. We decided to maintain the original book titles in the text.

or harmonious, (i.e. everything that is similar to the cosmos) also belongs to the order of the sacred. Identified with world creation, cosmogony becomes an exemplary model – or archetype – of all types of creation (ELIADE, 1963, p. 21). In myths the arrival of an animal, a plant, an institution, or any new situation always refers to this model⁴: “Origin myths continue and complete the cosmogenic myth; they tell how the world was changed, made richer or poorer” (IBIDEM).

The original myths – which are part of the symbolic heritage of all peoples – are followed by those myths which narrate the acquisition of techniques, food, the manufacture of artifacts, until they end up in eschatological myths which narrate the end of time. Order establishment is necessarily followed by periods of disorder inherent to it. After these, in the eternal return, the advent of a new era is announced. If the myths enact the alternation of these two states in their narratives, these same principles can be identified in other records dating back to the beginnings of human history.

According to Edgar Morin, the presence of disorder, or *hybrids*, can be detected from the discovery of *homo sapiens*: the *sapiens* reign corresponds to a massive introduction of disorder in the world (MORIN, 1973, p. 95). Founded under the auspices of order, human society fundamentally generates error and disorder. This is because the being that constitutes it, that *sapiens-demens*, endowed with *sound and fury*, is in Morin’s beautiful description:

He is a being of intense and unstable affectivity who smiles, laughs, cries, an anxious and concerned being, an enjoyable being, drunk, ecstatic, violent, loving, a being invaded by the imagination, a being who knows death and cannot believe it, a being who secretes myth and magic, a being possessed by spirits and gods, a being who feeds on illusions and chimeras, a subjective being whose relations with the objective world are always uncertain, a being subjected to error, to wandering, an ubric being who produces disorder (MORIN, 1973, p. 95. Own translation).⁵

Within the history of thought, although one could indefinitely seek reports that

⁴ T. N. When using the original text in French, the direct quotes translations will be made at the footnotes; otherwise the official English will be directly used.

⁵ Original: « C’est un être d’une affectivité intense et instable qui sourit, rit, pleure, un être anxieux et angoissé, un être jouisseur, ivre, extatique, violent, aimant, un être envahi par l’imaginaire, un être qui sait la mort et ne peut y croire, un être qui sécrète le mythe et la magie, un être possédé par les esprits et les dieux, un être qui se nourrit d’illusions et de chimères, un être subjectif dont les rapports avec le monde objectif sont toujours incertains, un être soumis à l’erreur, à l’errance, un être ubrique qui produit du désordre ».

opposed or combined order and disorder, what matters here is to emphasize the fundamental demand for an order that underlies all thought, be it mythical or rational, a proposition largely emphasized by Lévi-Strauss in "La science du concret" (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1962, pp. 3-47). However, if this demand for the order is fundamental, disorder as the polar opposite is also present in the very transcription and organization of mythical reports, making it possible from this perspective to identify two distinct literary genres within them.

Firstly, guided by the same ordering standard present in cosmogonies, mythic narratives are configured as a homogeneous corpus, chained in an orderly and coherent way. The greatest expression of these can be found in Mircea Eliade's work. Everything happens as if myths were presented to their collectors properly organized, expressing an undivided totality. There is no evidence of any disorderly or fragmentary element, neither in myths nor in its means of exposition.

Although this is the most frequent type of narrative there are still sets of myths narrated in the form of fragments. Fragments are more like patches, in which neither logic nor narrative coherence predominates. Illustrating each of these models with myth reviews of Canadian origin, Lévi-Strauss calls, for methodological purposes, the first corpus, the unitary, *classic*, and the second, the fragmentary, *baroque*. He identifies, in these two forms of narrative a particularly relevant issue for the mythologist (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1984, p. 150).⁶

Indeed, he wonders, would it be opportune to consider the unstructured set as an archaic form of myth which was later organized by sages and philosophers' native to that society or, on the contrary, this fragmented form would already be the result of a long process of deterioration and disorganization suffered by mythical matter, originally coherent and orderly? In the same way, would the fragmentary forms of the epic have been its starting point or its degraded expression? Lévi-Strauss still wonders whether this problem is not the same as that faced by the organizers of the *biblical vulgate*, who worked on extremely heterogeneous and fragmented material.

What interests him, of course, is not to determine the anteriority or posterity of a certain myth variant over another, as he had already learned from Marcel Mauss never

⁶ See also: LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1978, pp. 15-20.

to seek the original version of a myth, since it does not exist⁷. Far from being original, this problem emerges every time it is necessary to establish the methodological bases for apprehending a text originally belonging to the oral tradition. Lévi-Strauss's greatest intervention in this field was unquestionably the quarrel he had with Vladimir Propp concerning the composition of folktales. When approaching it he subscribes to a wide line of scholars that includes folklorists, linguists, Hellenists, and medievalists⁸ amongst others.

As is well known, it was Homer and Hesiod who established the canonical repertoire of mythical narratives; which is to say, that although their reports extend the oral tradition, they have already reached us in literary form. The distinction of styles, the certain formal resources used and different aesthetic intentions in each of the authors are all discernible in their works (VERNANT, 1990, pp. 203-261). Regarding Hesiod, specifically to *Theogony*, an interpretation of his texts predominated for a long time that emphasized the composite character of the work, the inconsistencies, and adherence inserted at different times, sometimes incompatible with each other.

Notwithstanding, later studies revealed the existence of an internal architecture of the text that is in no way due to a perfectly constructed philosophical system. This perspective turns Hesiod into the first thinker of the logos, as he proposes, according to Vernant (1990, p. 245), "ways of representing both the human and the divine universe". Although he celebrates the coherence and subtlety presented in Hesiod's "philosophical system", Vernant believes that his work is nevertheless in perfect harmony with the myth's language and way of thinking (VERNANT, 1990, p. 246).

In this last statement, there is, in my view, an almost insurmountable question – because it is contradictory – of myth studies: to fully enter the mythical universe, it is necessary in the first place to leave it. Trying to overcome this impasse, Lévi-Strauss, whose interest in Greek mythology was only punctual, created a method opposite to everything to the canonical approaches that preceded it.

As so often announced, its starting point is the certainty that "in a mechanical

⁷ See also: MAUSS, 1992, p. 252. Also look for: LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1958, p. 240.

⁸ See also: Detienne (1994).

civilization, there is no longer any place for mythical time except in man himself”, and that “every myth is a search for a lost time” (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1973a, pp. 225-226. Own translation⁹). Expressing wild thinking in a disenchanted world, he makes the great mythical adventure happen: for two decades, he lets himself be penetrated by myths, inebriated by them, allowing them to think among themselves, despite themselves. He says¹⁰: “For twenty years, waking up at dawn, drunk with myths, I truly lived in another world. Myths permeated me. You have to absorb so much more than you use” (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1988, p. 185. Own translation). And still:

We must incubate the myth for days, weeks, sometimes months until suddenly the spark arises, and, through an inexplicable myth detail, a modified one from another is recognized and so it may, from this angle, be reduced back to unity. Taken by itself, each detail is not obliged to mean anything, because it is in its differential relationship that resides its intelligibility (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1998, p. 186. Own translation)¹¹.

To allow oneself to be permeated by mythic matter without contaminating it, to allow oneself to be traversed by it, experiencing the transformation of body and mind into a simple receptacle, it is necessary to put into practice the exercise of the *rêverie*¹². Learned from Rousseau, this consists, fundamentally, of the double experience of cosmic fusion and self-dissolution. A state close to mystical ecstasy and aesthetic enjoyment, this experience is also known by the insane, by those who, suffering from a profound alteration of conscience, are led to abolish their personal history – to do the exorcism of themselves – and to repeat the cosmogonic act; that is, the restructuring of the world.

Sometimes creating imaginary beings, and recreating themselves through them, the patient becomes the very creator of the universe. As Claude Kappler¹³ demonstrates,

⁹ Original: « dans la civilisation mécanique, il n’y a plus de place, pour le temps mythique, qu’en l’homme même » // « tout mythe est une recherche du temps perdu »

¹⁰ Original: « Pendant vingt ans, levé à l’aube, soûlé de mythes, j’ai véritablement vécu dans un autre monde. Les mythes m’imprégnaient. Il faut en absorber tellement plus qu’on n’en utilise ».

¹¹ Original: « On doit incuber le mythe pendant des jours, des semaines, parfois des mois, avant que soudainement l’étincelle jaillisse et que, dans tel détail inexplicable d’un mythe, on reconnaisse transformé tel détail inexplicable d’un autre mythe, et qu’on puisse par ce biais les ramener à l’unité. Chaque détail pris en lui-même n’a besoin de rien signifier, car c’est dans leur rapport différentiel que réside leur intelligibilité ».

¹² T. N. We decided to keep the original French term used by Werneck.

¹³ T. N. The next quote was taken from: DURAND, 1951, p. 211.

in the transcription of a patient's account, this reformulation of the cosmos is undoubtedly of a mythical nature:

I can make the entire earth pass through me all the time because there is no end. I clean the matter by making it pass through my body. This matter has a shape because I gave it a shape. I wonder if the whole matter is not mine. My land dominates the former, which is absorbed toward mine. So, we are going to be on new land. Now the planet is done; it is solid; you can walk in it (DURAND *apud*. KAPPLER, 1994, p. 408. Own translation)¹⁴.

Without fearing the madness approach inherent in such an experience, Lévi-Strauss sees it as the most direct – and perhaps the only possible way – to the mythic land. Merging with him, you start thinking *like* him. By allowing myths to pass through, he tries to capture them in his movement, regardless of the form in which they appear: shattered, fragmented, or more finished versions, which will never be definitive: the mythical universe is always in constant mutation. *Its basic structure remains, but the cell contents are no longer the same and may vary*. In the same way, when one element is transformed, the others adapt to the change undergone by the first and in turn also change (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1978, p. 17).

Here it is once again worth remembering the metaphor of the kaleidoscope, which Lévi-Strauss uses to give greater visibility to his wild thought conception: a subtle movement is enough for the rosette formed by the small pieces of colored glass to break up and give a new configuration. This fortunate metaphor suggests the same idea present in a sentence by Franz Boas¹⁵, used as an epigraph in "La structure des mythes": "It seems that the mythological universes are destined to be pulverized as soon as they are formed so that new universes are born from their debris" (BOAS *apud*. LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1958, p. 227. Own translation)¹⁶.

¹⁴ Text to which we had access: "Posso fazer a terra inteira passar em mim, o tempo todo, porque não há fim. Limpo a matéria fazendo-a passar por dentro do meu corpo. Essa matéria tem forma porque eu lhe dei uma forma. Pergunto-me se toda a matéria não é a minha. Minha terra domina a antiga, que é sugada pela minha. Então a gente vai estar sobre uma nova terra. Agora o planeta está feito; está sólido; pode-se andar nele".

¹⁵ T. N. "Franz Boas, introduction à: James Teit, Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia, *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, VI (1898), p. 18" (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1958, p. 227).

¹⁶ Original: « On dirait que les univers mythologique sont destinés à être pulvérisés à peine formés, pour que de nou-

Albeit definitely choosing to apprehend the myth in its ephemeral, fragmentary, and shifting scintillation (which is also evident in the way of transcribing it in his analysis) however Lévi-Strauss does not stop building a work of cosmogonic pretension. Lévi-Straussian cosmogony does not begin with the traditional separation of light and darkness, but with a phenomenon of another order: the emergence of language, the human spirit's highest expression, which allowed the universe to gain meaning as a whole. Which, in any case, reproduces an inaugural tenet par excellence: in the beginning was the Word.

In the text that serves as an introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss, he precisely defines the assumptions of this founding moment:

Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance on the scale of animal life, language could only have arisen suddenly. Things could not begin to have a meaning gradually. Following a transformation, the study of which does not fall within the scope of the Social Sciences, but of Biology and Psychology, a passage took place, from a stage where nothing had any meaning to another where everything had it (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1950, p. 30. Own translation)¹⁷.

However, from the fact that the universe has become, in one stroke, *significant*, it does not follow that man has achieved immediate intelligibility of it: "The universe meant long before we started to know what it meant" (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1950, p. 30. Own translation)¹⁸. In its effort to understand the world, humanity has an excess of signifiers concerning the meanings to which they can be applied. Hence it follows that knowledge's every process, whether of a magical or scientific nature, consists of trying to repair this inadequacy:

veaux univers naissent de leurs débris ».

¹⁷ Original: « Quels qu'aient été le moment et les circonstances de son apparition dans l'échelle de la vie animale, le langage n'a pu naître que tout d'un coup. Les choses n'ont pas pu se mettre à signifier progressivement. A la suite d'une transformation dont l'étude ne relève pas des sciences sociales, mais de la biologie et de la psychologie, un passage s'est effectué, d'un stade où rien n'avait un sens, à un autre où tout en possédait ».

¹⁸ Original: « L'Univers a signifié bien avant qu'on ne commence à savoir ce qu'il signifiait ».

What is called the progress of the human mind and, in any case, of scientific knowledge, can and could ever only consist of rectifying divisions, proceeding toward regroupings, defining memberships, and discovering new resources, within a totality both closed and complementary to itself. (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1950, p. 33. Own translation)¹⁹.

Although it adopted the language used by contemporary science, more particularly the linguistics to elaborate the narration of its *Genesis*, the Lévi-Straussian worldview comes close to the old language of the doctrine of correspondences. The knowledge process is only fully realized when the “signatures” hidden in nature by an enigmatic creator are deciphered. In this epiphanic moment, close to a miracle, signifier and signified come together and reveal a world full of meaning. To organize his mythical world, Lévi-Strauss seeks, at the bottom of his childhood, a magical character who not by chance gets confused with his father’s image. Wild thinking, he says, is similar to a *bricoleur*, demiurge of a world where everything is shards and ruins, requiring them to be reordered and classified. It is not a god who creates the world from nothing. He just organizes it, working on a pre-existing matter.

Unlike the Greek demiurge, who creates the sensitive world from the Idea, the Lévi-Straussian demiurge operates in the exact opposite direction: he reintegrates, in the world of ideas in which the human sciences have become embedded, the sensitive experience. The myth, lived as an *intimate experience*, is not necessarily meaningful but it has sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Continuing his task, the *bricoleur* orders the sensitive world, draws up inventories as complete as possible, interrogates them, and extracts disinterested knowledge from this exercise. It classifies plants and animals obeying the same ordering and classifying principle that underlies all creation of the world. The universal order follows the same logic as thought. That is why it does not let any being or object escape and assures it its place within the creation system, arranging it in classes, species, and genera. Each thing found has a special charm and, by interweaving scientific, artistic, or magical inventories, the *bricoleur* extracts from all this an amazing aesthetic experience, which is brought about by

¹⁹ Original: « Ce qu’on appelle le progrès de l’esprit humain et, en tout cas, le progrès de la connaissance scientifique, n’a pu et ne pourra jamais consister qu’à rectifier des découpages, procéder à des regroupements, définir des appartenances et découvrir des ressources neuves, au sein d’une totalité fermée et complémentaire avec elle-même ».

the chance of unusual combinations.

Sensitive to the fragmentary form of the myth, bringing together shards and ruins of his essential material, the bricoleur Lévi-Strauss starts his narrative from any point, a reference myth, to which he calls the bird-nester (*dénicheur d'oiseau*) (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1964, p. 43-45). As a starting point, but also an ending point, this myth serves as a guiding thread and through progressive enlargements of its field of action, which he calls semantic contamination, traverses the mythical universe as a whole. Identified in the "Mythologique" as M₁, it was initially located by Lévi-Strauss in a Bororo chant known as *shogobeu*, belonging to the *paiowe* clan.

It tells the story of incest committed by a young Indian with his mother. Upon discovering the transgression, the father decides to take revenge and forces his son to carry out three impossible missions in the "nest of souls". With the help of a witched grandmother, who puts the powers of the hummingbird, *jurití*, and locust at the service of her *protégé*, the young man can successfully fulfill his father's demands. Frustrated in his revenge, the father then invites him to accompany him in capturing macaw chicks whose nests are found on the sides of rocks. Armed with a magic stick – a gift from his grandmother –, the bird-nester (*dénicheur d'oiseau*) manages to get rid of all dangers, successively metamorphosing into a gecko, four different birds' types, and a butterfly.

Unwilling to grant forgiveness neither to his father nor to his companions who mistreated him, the hero takes his grandmother to a distant and beautiful country and comes back to take his revenge. In a hunt, pretending to be a deer, he uses false horns and attacks his father, piercing and throwing him into a lake, where he is devoured by cannibal fishes. Only the victim's lungs are spared, and they surface in an aquatic plant form. He also kills all his father's wives, including his mother, and finally sends the wind, cold, and rain to his village.

The story does not end here. Throughout the "Mythologiques" four volumes, Lévi-Strauss follows the unfolding of the theme and its multiple variations. The myth expands, stretches, deforms, concentrates, exhausts itself. It is possible to understand, among other things, the toponymy of the Bororo village, the origin of rain, the cold, wind, and aquatic plants. And yet the link, symbolic or real, between the imposition of the use of the penile case and the regulation of relations between the sexes.

It is from this referential myth, yet not a founding one, that all the others appear. When introducing it, Lévi-Strauss calls it “the myth-breaker aria”. A musical piece composed for a single voice, this aria is gradually expanding and changing. Fulfilling a *leitmotif* function in the mythical scene, it reappears, in the eternal return, each time its presence is invoked, and it remakes itself no matter how much its mythical element has undergone successive transformations.

These possibilities for exploring the myth, in Lévi-Strauss, which sometimes takes on a musical configuration, can also be identified both in the history of painting, as well as in the botanical work of Goethe or the work of the Scottish zoologist D’Arcy Thompson under the name of anamorphoses. These are distortions of perspective that, although have their origin in the Renaissance, with Dürer and Holbeim, were reappropriated by the Surrealists, by Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis, and by Jean Cocteau, among other contemporary artists.

According to Jurgis Baltrusaitis (1984), an art historian who dedicated a book to the subject, the perspective game that is known as *anamorphosis* consists of deforming the image, until its disappearance, in such a way that it redirects itself when viewed from determined a point of view. This is not a pure and simple deformation, but a particular and rigorous application of the laws of perspective. For Baltrusaitis, this form of knowledge derives from a mechanism of the spirit; both, rational and poetic. If it is born from an “illusion of forms”, it is nevertheless one of the faces of the reality of human history, and the exact sciences would be incomplete if it were not considered.

At the same time, says Baltrusaitis, the experience of anamorphosis reaches cosmogonic dimensions, insofar as it evokes a universal and dramatic phantasmagoria. They are aberrations in both senses of the term: they suggest a loss, a disorder of reason, and, at the same time, an optical phenomenon, which has the effect of making celestial bodies be seen in a place and in a direction where they are not found. They correspond to the world of appearances and have an undeniable faculty of transfiguration.

Never using the term anamorphosis – which in Greek means transformation –, Lévi-Strauss appropriates his principles and applies them to myths when researching their variational systems. As explained in “Comment meurent les mythes”, these can suffer deformations until they lose their sharpness, but they retain, in some way, their myth-

ical substance, since the deformations suffered are not random, but caused by their laws' particular application:

These transformations which take place from one myth variant to another, from one myth to another myth, from one society to another society about the same myth, or different myths, affect sometimes the framework, sometimes the code, sometimes the message of the myth, but without the latter ceasing to exist as such; thus, they respect a sort of principle of conservation of mythical matter under the terms of which any myth could always emerge from another (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1973b, p. 301. Own translation)²⁰.

Everything happens as if the myth had been subjected to a deforming mirror reflection. To illustrate this idea, Lévi-Strauss even builds a mirror chamber, a kind of optical device, through which he observes the myth:

Things occur here as in optics. An image is exactly perceived through a suitable opening. But if we let it shrink, the image becomes confused and hardly perceptible. However, when the opening is reduced to a punctual hole, that is, when communication tends to disappear, the image is reversed and regains its clarity (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1973b, p. 223).²¹

The experiment, continues Lévi-Strauss, is used in schools to demonstrate that light rays do not propagate in any way, but within structured field limits. Like this²²: "If this experience [the analysis of a myth] has helped to show that the mythical thought is also

20 Original: « Ces transformations qui s'opèrent d'une variante à une autre d'un même mythe, d'un mythe à un autre mythe, d'une société à une autre société pour les mêmes mythes ou pour des mythes différents, affectent tantôt l'armature, tantôt le code, tantôt le message du mythe, mais sans que celui-ci cesse d'exister comme tel ; elles respectent ainsi une sorte de principe de conservation de la matière mythique aux termes duquel de tout mythe pourrait toujours sortir un autre mythe ».

21 Original: « Les choses se passent ici comme en optique. Une image est exactement aperçue au travers d'une ouverture adéquate. Mais, que celle-ci rétrécisse, l'image devient confuse et difficilement perceptible. Pourtant, quand l'ouverture se trouve réduite à un orifice ponctuel, c'est-à-dire quand la communication tend à disparaître, l'image s'inverse et retrouve sa netteté ».

22 Original: « Si cette expérience a pu contribuer à montrer que le champ de la pensée mythique est, lui aussi, fermement structuré, elle aura atteint son but ».

firmly structured, it will have achieved its goal" (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1973b, p. 224. Own translation).

If Lévi-Strauss does not use the anamorphosis term itself – preferring alternatively to speak of a transformations system –, he illustrates it in a particularly clear way. In "L'Homme nu" he reproduces, as an illustration of his method, a series of fish anamorphoses, taken from D'Arcy Thompson's book "Forme et croissance". He also reaffirms it through one of the "De près et de loin" French editions, whose cover shows a cylindrical anamorphosis by E. Beck titled "America", a painting that can be seen in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris.

This anamorphic perspective is important to be detected in his thought because, plastically, it sets the myth in motion, until its almost dissolution, an idea that Lévi-Strauss had previously sought in Wagnerian music, under the form of chromatism, and cosmic fusion, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Even though he uses different operators, the author of "Mythologiques" always pursues the same principle that, according to him, governs the structure of the human spirit.

More than looking for examples throughout the tetralogy, which could accurately locate the use of the procedure, it can be suggested that the "Mythologiques" constitute an immense single myth anamorphosis, designed by Lévi-Strauss throughout the American continent; in each myth variant, its image is enlarged, frayed, exhausted, inverted, and transformed. The methodological application of this resource demonstrates, once again, Lévi-Strauss' curious ability to think through images, which makes him the heir of a long tradition, present not only in narrative theory but also in the history of thought as a whole.

One of the oldest French references is found in the 1640 Jesuit Pierre Le Moyne treatise entitled "Peintures morales, où les passions sont représentées par tableaux, par caractères, et par questions nouvelles et curieuses". This work, more than eight hundred pages arranged in three volumes, significantly reorients the epistemological principles then in motion, as, by introducing the pictorial dimension in reflection, the emphasis on language is reduced and its figurative aspects emphasized (REISS, 1993, *passim*).

Jean-François Lyotard calls this type of writing text-figural, viz., a visible text, that is built first to be visible. Taking side with the imagery, Lyotard demonstrates that every discourse is inhabited in its underground by a form, an image, which acts on the text surface and adds distinctive characteristics of expression and affection to its meaning and

rationality (LYOTARD, 1985, p. 15). The proximity to the figure that an *imagé* text establishes can be obtained not only by the plastic strength of a word but also by the rhythmic strength of the syntax and of the narrative matrix itself (LYOTARD, 1985, p. 249).

But it is the rebus, an allegorical divination form composed of a sequence of drawings and letters – and which literally means *with* things –, which best illustrates, according to Lyotard, the figure and discourse articulation, since it operates from a subversion of the proper spaces of image and language. In other words, the rebus would mean a plastic intervention in the linguistic space (LYOTARD, 1985, pp. 295-296). The *rebus* tradition is linked to the Egyptian hieroglyph, which operates analogously, through images of things (HANSEN, 1987, p. 102).

Of great playful effect, this enigmatic writing was in great vogue in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – the Hachette almanac even published the version of a serial, *Rouletabille*, written entirely in the *rebus* form. For Lyotard, this general public fascination for a language type that contains encrypted content is of the same order which guided Mallarmé, Freud, and Cézanne in their *avant-garde* researches (LYOTARD, 1985, p. 296).

These names could certainly be added to Lévi-Strauss, who has always shown interest in every discourse that brings together, at the same time and in the same place, an image and an enigma. It is not by chance, in the rich iconography of his thought, that the rebus, identified with the myth, also occupies a privileged space. For him,

Curiosity towards myths arises from a very deep feeling that we are currently unable to penetrate in nature. What is a beautiful object? What does aesthetic emotion consist of? Perhaps this is what in the final analysis, through myths, we confusedly seek to understand (BELLOUR, 1967, p. 7. Own translation)²³.

To think of myths as objects, like things, and, as such, to internalize them. This, shortly, is Lévi-Strauss's plastic experience. His imagetic writing, his figural text, which is projected, whether in "narrated paintings" in "Tristes tropiques" – portraits and landscapes – or in the collages and anamorphosis of the "Mythologiques", recalls, to some ex-

²³ Original: « La curiosité envers les mythes naît d'un sentiment très profond dont nous sommes actuellement incapables de pénétrer la nature. Qu'est-ce qu'un bel objet ? En quoi consiste l'émotion esthétique ? Peut-être est-ce cela qu'en dernière analyse, à travers les mythes, nous cherchons confusément à comprendre ».

tent, the Baroque allegorical writing. Not in its form, certainly, but in its spirit, in the sense attributed by Walter Benjamin: "Allegory is said always to reveal a 'crossing of borders of a different mode', and advance of the plastic arts into the territory of the 'rhetorical arts'" (BENJAMIN, 1998, p. 1

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