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CARLOS CASTANEDA: THE USES AND ABUSES OF
ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND EMIC STUDIES

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Abstract: Carlos Castaneda's books and his New Age shamanistic religion raise, beyond the controversy regarding the counterfeit character of his ethnographic narrative and charlatanism, several methodological problems. Educated within the emerging paradigm of *emic* studies and ethnomethodology of the 1960s, Castaneda used it in order to set a very clever methodological trap: Can an ethnologist and historian of religions discard a religious movement on account that its initiator is a charlatan or, at best, an enlightened or self-deluded individual? In order to tackle this dilemma, in this article I successively rally several methods and hermeneutics: reader-response theory, phenomenological anthropology, ethnomethodology and *emic* studies, psychoanalysis, fictional worlds theory, and "make believe / make belief" theatrical theory.

Key Words: Carlos Castaneda, phenomenological anthropology, ethnomethodology, *emic* studies, psychoanalysis, fictional worlds theory, make believe / make belief, willing suspension of disbelief.

Castaneda – a shaman or a charlatan?

In 1968, Carlos Castaneda, a graduate from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), published *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, an ethnographic book that was soon to become a best seller. Here Castaneda recounts how in 1960, while he was a student of anthropology, doing field research in the south of the United States, he encountered a shaman (*diablero*, *brujo*) from the Yaqui Indian tribe. Although his goal was to investigate shamanic practices scientifically, Castaneda confesses to having been swallowed by the system of beliefs he was investigating. This resulted in his abandoning the observer position and becoming an apprentice of Juan Matus, his “benefactor”. The book claims to be a relatively accurate transcription of Carlos’s experiences and the teachings he received during those years. His apprenticeship would last until 1974, when Juan Matus, we are told, left this world; its recounting (reminiscing) would, however, encompass ten more volumes, spanning a period of thirty years, until 1998, when Castaneda died.

His books immediately won extraordinary acclaim and were quickly translated into the main international languages, being published in millions of copies. As told by Carlos, don Juan’s “teachings” became an esoteric system which won over thousands of fans and followers. Castaneda himself built an intimate circle around him, the “nagual party”, made up of three “sorceresses” who also claimed to have been initiated by Juan Matus’s shamans. Two of these, Florinda Donner and Taisha Abelar, have also published books in which they describe their own initiations. During the last years of his life, Castaneda supported the setting up of a school of “magical passes”, exercises designed to control the practitioners’ energy bodies. The activity of the Tensegrity school has continued even after the master’s death and it can also be accessed online (see www.castaneda.com). The overall impression is that we have witnessed the birth of a religious movement, which nonetheless has the complexity and sophistication specific to the New Age religious sensibility; Castaneda himself appears to be a prophet who shares the teachings he has allegedly inherited from a quasi-Neolithic sage.

The movement’s detractors were quick to appear. Looked at from a Western positivist and scientist perspective, the shamanic techniques and powers Castaneda claims to have acquired surpass the category of the natural and the credible, verging on the supernatural and the mystical. While his first books, credited by his professors with being ethnographic studies, brought Castaneda the degrees of master and doctor in anthropology, making it possible for him to embark on an academic career, they were also soon called into question by ethnologists and by historians of religions. Intrigued as they were by the figures of don Juan and his apprentice, various journalists tried in vain to certify the existence

of Juan Matus and his shaman group. In 1974, *Times* magazine dedicated an issue to Castaneda, in which the reporter also went to great lengths to investigate the accuracy of the interviewee's claims. The conclusions were that the biographical (and not only) information furnished by Castaneda was largely fabricated.

The controversy surrounding Castaneda was thus born. While his professors at UCLA continued to uphold him, other specialists started arguing that his experiences could by no means be true. R. Gordon Wasson, for instance, has shown that the hallucinogenic mushrooms invoked by Castaneda do not grow in the places he indicates, nor are they used by the Yaqui Indians.¹ Hans Sebald has proved conclusively that the Sonoran desert where Carlos claims to have received a substantial part of his mentor's teachings is described in an altogether unrealistic fashion, contradicting the reality of the geography, the flora, the climate and the life conditions there.²

In two devastatingly ironic books, Richard de Mille has gathered a vast amount of evidence on the fabricated character of Castaneda's texts. He structured his arguments on the premise of charlatanism into three categories: 1. the so-called field notes are self-contradictory and appear to be the drafts of a novel; 2. the books lack convincing facts but teem with implausible details; 3. Juan Matus's "teachings" are a mishmash of Amerindian folklore, Oriental mysticism and European philosophy.³ The alleged sources for Castaneda's works are identified as Yogi Ramacharaka, Mircea Eliade, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alexandra David-Neel, Suzanne Langer, E. Sapir, Laura Govieda, D. T. Suzuki, Leightons, Petrullo, Pozas, Steward, Underhill, etc. The books that Castaneda most likely plagiarized or imitated are Morris Edward Opler's *An Apache Life-Way. The Economic, Social, and Religious Institutions of the Chiricahua Indians* (1941) and *Apache Odyssey: A Journey between Two Worlds* (1969), as well as Barbara G. Myerhoff's *The Deer-Daize-Peyote Complex among the Huichol Indians of Mexico* (1969) and *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* (1974). At the end of the volume entitled *The Don Juan Papers: further Castaneda controversies* (1981), Richard de Mille even compiles an "Aleglossary" with a list of the concepts that Castaneda appears to have borrowed from all these sources.

Although Castaneda's loss of scientific and academic credibility was swift, he was not to be abandoned by his admirers and by Tensegrity practitioners. The Pocket Books editions of his books continue to signal that his works belong to the "nonfiction" genre, even though Richard de Mille considers Castaneda as "one of the world's great hoaxers", a "trickster-teacher" and "the shaman of Academe",⁴ while historians of religions, like Ioan Petru Culianu, do not hesitate to qualify Castaneda as a "fiction writer" and a "novelist".⁵ One of Castaneda's former disciples, Ralph Torjan, who has made a film documentary entitled "Carlos Castaneda: Enigma of a Sorcerer" (2004), does not hide the fact that his

apprenticeship had a profound and beneficent effect upon him, but demonstrates that Juan Matus is a fictional character and that the teachings Carlos “gathered” from him are inspired from the general bibliography of shamanism and occultism.⁶

We are therefore confronted with a dilemma: what is Carlos Castaneda? Is he a sorcerer or a charlatan? Readers who lay hands on his books are faced with two options: they may either naively and gullibly accept them as such, or skeptically and condescendingly reject them.

At first sight, one might say that a reader’s response mainly depends on the answer to the following question: can we still unconditionally believe in the supernatural? Can we still surmount our scientist-positivist education which causes us to distrust magic and esotericism as forms of (self-)delusion? Judging by the success of Castaneda’s books and the Tensegrity school, one might say that postmodernity and the New Age culture have a tremendous propensity towards the religious, that occultism and sorcery are in fact, as Mircea Eliade has shown, genuine “cultural fads” which answer some profound, archetypal needs of the human being.⁷ Lately, neurotheology has shown that religious experiences are the result of some specific but natural activities of the brain.⁸ So we might safely assume that under exceptional circumstances, whether they be traumatic or initiatory, within each and every one of us a certain anthropological substratum might get reactivated, overcoming rationally imposed restrictions and connecting us to a *numinous* message.

Notwithstanding all this, can we still unreservedly devote ourselves to faith? Does man still have that capacity to ingeniously accept religious experience without developing a guilty conscience? We know too well that the dominating mentality tends to discredit religious people as spiritually depleted or as deviant individuals who find psychoanalytical compensation in religion for personal problems and traumas they do not have the courage to address directly. Given that ever since the eighteenth century, religion has been castigated as an error of reasoning or as opium for the people, can we still accept a religious message, such as Castaneda’s, without suspecting ourselves that we are or we have become “weak spirits” (in contrast with those *esprits forts* glorified by the illuminists) in search for phantasmatic surrogates for our own obsessions, phobias, impotence and failures? Within the modern cultural paradigm, which downright rejects the possibility of accepting the supernatural as such, any recourse to mysticism involves a form of *mauvaise conscience*. The positivist inhibition has permeated our social formation, if not our very collective gene: it can no longer simply be ignored, since any inner rearrangement must, by necessity, take it into account.

On the other hand, we may just as well ask what and how much is lost when we unconditionally accept the verdict passed by reason and common sense, which represent the norm nowadays. When assessing Castaneda’s books as fictional, Culianu and scientists in general risk losing

sight of the very numinous potential of these “fictions”, which is what has fascinated millions of readers and hundreds of the practitioners of magical passes. Although Castaneda’s accounts are entirely fabricated, they have proved capable of activating beliefs and devotions – ingenious, true, but no less (psychologically) real. Which part of the present-day man’s soul does Castaneda address? What exactly does he activate in our subconscious?

The contradictory and, sometimes, vehement, responses triggered by Castaneda’s writings are relevant for the dead-end modernity has brought us to. Modern dichotomous thought leaves us with only two types of responses or reactions for judging such religious manifestations. On the one hand, we may suspend rational skepticism and adhere to them indiscriminately, making ourselves guilty – both in the eyes of those around us and, more gravely, perhaps, to our own super-ego – of naïve mysticism and religious kitsch. On the other hand, we may give vent to skepticism and our scientific incredulity, treating Castaneda’s works as deliberate fabrications (that is, accuse the author of charlatanism) or, at best, as systematic delirium. In other words, as Concha Labarta addresses the issue in an interview with Castaneda’s “party” of sorceresses, “our tendency is either not to trust such accounts at all, or to accept that their protagonists are beyond good and evil, and that they are not touched by disease, old age and death”; in other words, to regard them as magical beings.⁹

Is there no way of eschewing such a depleting and amputating dilemma? What I shall try to outline is a way out of this hermeneutical strait, bordered as it is by the Scylla of skepticism and the Charybdis of fanaticism. In so doing, I shall successively rally several methods and hermeneutics that could hopefully cope with this impasse: reader response theory, phenomenological anthropology, ethnomethodology and *emic* studies, psychoanalysis, fictional worlds theory, “make believe / make belief” theatrical theory.

Reader Response Theory

One first suggestion as to how we should tackle this conundrum comes from reception theory. In an essay on the aesthetics of literature, Gaëtan Picon makes a distinction between the naïve reader and the professional/educated reader. The ingenuous reader practices an identificatory reading, responding to works of art as if they were “nature’s spectacles or life’s events”. He substitutes himself to the character and lives the latter’s adventures as if they were his own experiences, demanding from the book “the illusion of a life he would find emotionally rewarding to live” (Picon, 1973, 74-76). The “*midinette*”, for instance, is a generically naïve reader, who cries for the protagonists’ sorrows in romances, as if she were projecting and transferring her own hopes, ideals

and frustrations onto them. She uses books like memory-screens or external correlatives enabling her to act out certain subconscious affective tensions. In other words, the naïve reader responds to fiction as if it were real, and perceives literature just like he perceives life, things or dreams. This might also be the case of Castaneda's "naïve" readers.

The educated reader, on the other hand, is aware of the difference between actual life and aesthetic experience, between the work of art's psychological relevance and its aesthetic experience. His responses to reading may, of course, be emotional but, because he is aware of the gap between literary symbols and their psychological content, between art and real life, he sublimates them, approaching them as sheer symbols and allegories. Aesthetic experience is a "test-tube" experience; within such an aseptic, protected environment of the "as if", it reproduces the tensions of the real life experiences, assisting thus in their discharge, conscientious avowal and, perhaps, mastery. The entire theory of catharsis from Aristotle to Freud can be invoked to support this. One should emphasize here, however, that at a careful look, the educated reader does not supplant the naïve reader: he merely supplements him. Like in many other cases, reading may be said to presuppose a duplication of inner positioning: within each and every one of us there is an ingenuous, emotional reader, whose responses are nonetheless suspended and relativised by a distant and somewhat disenchanted reader.

Problems may emerge when, for various biographical, formative, temperamental, characterial or psychoanalytical reasons, the educated reader is not content with observing and toning down the naïve reader, attempting instead, arrogantly and self-sufficiently, to displace the latter. A "professional" reading is generally processed through the lenses of a positivist, materialistic, skeptical, even atheist, perhaps, superego, which is bent on censoring and deprecating the reactions of primitive reception; in Castaneda's case, an educated reading would, by necessity, be a hostile reading. The difficult path that I consider worth following is one that allows us to retrieve our genuine reading experiences, while maintaining, at the same time, our discriminating capacity and the detachment of our rational standpoint intact.

Phenomenological anthropology

A second way to address the afore-mentioned dilemma comes from the history of religions and contemporary ethnology. Over the course of the past century and a half, ethnology has undergone profound methodological changes.¹⁰ At the turn of the twentieth century, ethnology and the history of religions were coupled, methodologically, with positivism and modern scientism. For that reason, the researcher's position tended to be undermined by his cognitive paradigm. While investigating shamanism, possession phenomena or magic, for instance, a

researcher could not help qualitatively modifying the data he interpreted and systematized, despite his programmatic rigor and accuracy in collecting those data. Having been conditioned not to believe in a world of spirits, the positivist researcher would either dismiss the whole issue by labeling it superstitious, or look for alternative explanations, extrinsic to those provided by the practitioners of those religions, of the kinds provided by social scientists (Durkheim, Van Gennep etc.) or by psychologists (Levy-Bruhl, Jung etc.).

This drawback became all the more apparent once Heisenberg had formulated the uncertainty principles in quantum physics, whereby the act of observation modifies the state of the observed object. In order to reduce and even eliminate procedural weakness, ethnologists replaced the positivist method with the phenomenological method. Researchers like Mircea Eliade have systematically set out to “bracket” any assumptions from outside the system under observation, and to analyze only the information internal to the system, without attempting to judge or assess it. The researcher thus deliberately becomes a *tabula rasa*, onto which the field phenomena are to be assembled in order to enable the extraction of certain invariable paradigms. The ultimate goal of such “eidetic reduction” is detecting, amongst the vastness of world religions, a general human model of “*homo religiosus*”.

However, given that, like the white noise in acoustics or the black chamber in thermodynamics, a neutral researcher represents a methodological utopia, contemporary anthropology has developed an even more nuanced position. The guiding principle here is the so-called postmodern relativism, according to which all value and truth judgments are dependent upon group consensus, which means they are relative and equally justified. Edward Sapir talks about the “arbitrary modes of interpreting the reality which social tradition constantly suggests to us, from the very moment of our birth”.¹¹ Alfred Schutz has also defined an “intersubjective” reality, a “world of Us”, which comes into being through the exchange of information between people who live in the same physical and social environment. This definition of a social-constructed reality may be found in the concept of the *tonal* attributed by Castaneda to the sorcerers’ view of the world.

Starting from here, Harold Garfinkel has created the so-called *ethnomethodology*, a hermeneutics which takes into account the premise that all outlooks onto the world are subjective or “intersubjective” for that matter, since they are the result of the consensus between a group of people. His disciples, Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood go for a more radical approach, claiming that there is no privileged position, no “real” reality, that all representations of reality are equally real and that none contains more truth than the others. This ethnomethodological propensity towards absolute subjectivism has found significant support in the “anti-realistic” philosophies of the past couple of decades (Goodman,

Putnam, Maturana, etc.), which are, in their turn, contested by “realists” such as John Searle.

Irrespective of the outcome of this philosophical controversy, ethnology has benefited from the insight that, while a researcher cannot leave his formation and cultural conditionings aside (this would be the phenomenological utopia), he should, nonetheless, have the lucidity and honesty to analyze his own suppositions so as to isolate them as much as possible in the presentation that he gives his object of study. An exemplary formulation of this methodological attitude may be found in I. M. Lewis book, *Ecstatic Religion* (1971, reedited in 2003). In his research on shamanism and spirit possession, Lewis makes the following preliminary specifications: 1. A researcher must not contest the beliefs of the people he studies from the vantage point of his own religious incredulity (“My starting point, consequently, is precisely that large numbers of people in many different parts of the world do believe in gods and spirits. And I certainly do not presume to contest the validity of their beliefs, or to imply, as some anthropologists do, that such beliefs are so patently absurd that those who hold them do not ‘really’ believe in them. My objective is not to explain away religion”); 2. A researcher must not judge and valorize the beliefs of the people he studies from the vantage point of his own convictions (“He has neither the skills nor the authority to pronounce upon the absolute ‘truth’ of ecstatic manifestations in different cultures. Nor is it its business to assess whether other people’s perceptions of divine truth are more or less compatible with those embodied in his own religious heritage, whatever he may feel about the latter”).¹²

Such precautions allow us to distinguish between two aspects of the “scandal” unleashed by Castaneda’s books. In that sense, psychoanalyst Elsa First also distinguishes between two types of readers: the naïve and the educated. One can therefore speak about two categories of hostile readers: the naïve skeptics, who refuse the supernatural events Castaneda describes, and the educated skeptics, who will not have their say on the supernatural but will refute the credibility of Castaneda’s accounts.¹³ For the sake of symmetry, one might also envisage two categories of sympathetic readers: the naïve ingénues and the educated ingénues.

The first class of readers, the “naïve skeptics”, tend to respond to the substantial controversy triggered by the attack which “don Juan’s teachings” launch against the western outlook onto the world, and against the essentially atheist “common sense”. Turning into a raven, soaring into the sky and physically moving from one place to another while dreaming are unacceptable events for the “standard” Westerner. As more or less materialistic and positivist individuals, we are neither ready nor willing to accept such experiences as real.

However, taking into account the positioning precautions taken by the contemporary ethnologist, the argument of personal convictions on

the supernatural is no longer tenable. Suspending personal beliefs may lead into two directions.

On the one hand, a progressive elimination of naïve skepticism may give birth to the “educated ingénue”. This position may be exemplified by a renowned researcher such as Mary Douglas, who endorses “Castaneda’s authenticity” as follows: “It may be difficult to judge the spirituality of the religion revealed in this series because of the deafening clichés in which it is perforce rendered. But it would be more difficult to defend formally the view that their echoing contemporary philosophical concerns is proof of their bogus character. For they are consistently knitted into an attitude towards life and death and human rationality whose very coherence is alien to our contemporary thought”.¹⁴

On the other hand, the refinement of naïve skepticism leads to the position of the educated skeptic. Unlike the naïve skeptic, who cannot personally adhere to an alien worldview, the educated skeptic derives his disbelief from the very internal coherence of Castaneda’s writings, irrespective of his own convictions about their ontological possibility. Richard de Mille contradicts Mary Douglas by distinguishing between authenticity and validity, as discrete and somewhat independent components of truth. Validity refers to the “correspondence between the content of a scientific report and some established background of theory and recorded observation. A report is judged valid when it agrees with what we think we know”.¹⁵ This entails the fact that a clever charlatan may produce a scientifically valid text without having a genuine field experience, provided he uses information extracted from a library correctly. According to Richard de Mille, Castaneda’s books amount to a scholarly scandal, a manner of “Garfinkelising” ethnomethodology, or using it in a perverse direction, in the sense of manipulating relativism so as to make fiction pass for ethnography.

And yet, as defined by I. M. Lewis, the anthropological approach provides a way out of the impasse of both naïve and educated skepticism. As regards the former, it can be down-toned from the relativist standpoint of the history of religions. After all, we have no qualms in accepting ethnological studies on traditional shamanism, which list, amongst the shaman’s powers, zoomorphism, out-of-body experiences, levitation, bi-location, etc. The same attitude may be extended onto Castaneda’s writings, putting an end to the rational “scandal”. Read as ethnographic documents, his books have no more and no less relevance than the ethnographic accounts of a shaman who has returned from his trance. They may be regarded as records of contemporary anthropology that document the way in which a neo-shamanistic religion is proposed and legitimated in the New Age.

In so far as educated skepticism is concerned, given that it queries the very ethnographic authenticity of Castaneda’s books, accusing them of charlatanism, of being fiction fraudulently clothed as reality, we may

think that, whether real or fictional, “don Juan’s teachings” have already consolidated into an esoteric system which a substantial number of people practice and believe in. They have become a religious phenomenon in itself. Juan Matus may never have truly existed and he may have been entirely made up by his apprentice, but this does not lessen the power of fascination exerted by his “teachings” onto the larger public. In that sense, Paul Riesman contends that “[a] basic tenet in Castaneda’s books is that experience is not something that just happens to us but something we in large measure create, though we are usually unaware of our creative role. Even if don Juan does not ‘really exist’, his non-existence doesn’t mean his proposition can be summarily dismissed. For one thing, if his proposition is true, then the very question of whether don Juan exists becomes less important because in any case the way he appears in Castaneda’s books is an artifact of someone’s perception – not only Carlos’s perception, but ours too, as readers”.¹⁶

To underlie religious experience, don Juan need not be more “real” than is, for example, an angel, a daïmon, a god or a spirit. After all, no religion was born from a continuous, uninterrupted, physically quantifiable, manifestation of the sacred to a compact mass of people, but through an intercessor, through the revelations of a prophet or a messiah. Furthermore, who could possibly determine the extent to which these revelations represent credible visions of an effective suprareality or psychological hallucinations and psychotropic delirium? Who could conclusively establish whether they are faithful transcripts or later adaptations and systematizations, or even sheer fabrications? The controversy surrounding the historical existence of Juan Matus may be overcome if attention is shifted onto the system which the apprentice ascribes to his master and onto the way in which a mass of people can approach this system as a revelation, as an initiation, as an “annunciation”.

Let us concede, however, that such a solution does not fully satisfy the entire range of our expectations. It can, at best, relocate the active, irreducible core of the problem into a safer, more secure area or attitude. Seen through an anthropologist’s lenses, Castaneda’s accounts become a discrete object of study on which, according to the principles of contemporary research, we have suspended all opinions and judgments, in which we should not get involved except as researchers and theoreticians. We accept them because we have somehow sterilized them, having ourselves been shot with some immunity serum (the scientific position). Which means that we have dispatched the essence of the matter, that we have detached ourselves as human individuals with our own fears of death and obscure anxieties from the existential problem raised by these books. We have managed to remove Castaneda’s accounts from the mystical space of a living, actual human being, into the space of traditional

shamanism, isolated from us through time, geographical and cultural barriers.

In other words, if we do not wish to oversimplify the discussion, we will have to admit that Castaneda's challenge heads in the reverse direction, that of rethinking shamanism not as a chapter in the history of religions, but as a new technique, accessible to us today in our quotidian life. Barbara G. Myerhoff, an ethnologist and Castaneda's UCLA fellow anthropology student, confesses to having felt deceived and fooled when she realized her friend had made up his experiences, but adds: "then I thought about how I had really only had delight and amusement from Carlos and, in the long run, enlightenment, which is more than you get from most people. So I decided it was okay to feel foolish".¹⁷ Given their enlightening effects even upon highly qualified audiences, Castaneda's "lies" are too dense to be mere deceit.

Fictional worlds' theory

The very claim that don Juan's "teachings" are "nonfictional" takes the problem of reception beyond the aesthetic realm, doubly amplifying it, we might say. The distinction operated by Gaëtan Picon between the naïve and the educated readers is, admittedly, limited to fiction; furthermore, Castaneda's books resume with renewed acuity the discussion on cross-border genres, such as the journal or the travelogue.

We know, for instance, the difficult process whereby the consciousness and the convention of fictionality emerged in the case of Antique and Medieval travel accounts. The real and the fictional were to be conveniently isolated only later, when English empiricism and the new modern science imposed the pragmatic criterion of empirical verification. As long as certifying the authenticity of an account depended on other criteria (the authority of the inherited sources, religious and metaphysical assumptions, etc.), a strange ambiguity (from the contemporary perspective) hovered above these writings. John Mandeville, the author of imaginary *Travels to Asia*, which compile the entire medieval tradition on the marvels of the East, was amongst the most valuable sources in Christopher Columbus's library, serving as his guide for the Asia he looked for in his transatlantic journey.

Beginning with the second half of the seventeenth century, when the experimental criteria of modern science were perfected, travel literature also underwent a transformation, in the sense of a separation between real and fictive expeditions. It was also the moment when, reacting to that, writers began to play with the reality convention, inserting narrative clues that pretended to geographically attest entirely fabricated journeys. That is why texts like *Gulliver's Travels*, which no longer raise any classification concerns nowadays, could still be mistaken by some of Swift's less "sharp"-minded contemporaries as fully entitled to the claim

of verisimilitude, which could also lead them to castigate such a “liar” and “charlatan” in rather vitriolic terms. Conversely, the same confusion could also prevent, for instance, the account of a real expedition across the Indian Ocean, namely that of the small colony set up by François Leguat on Rodrigues island (1691-1698), from being acknowledged as factual until the turn of the twentieth century.

Castaneda’s books rely on the double game of cross-border genres. The author’s type of discourse (ethnographic notation, journal, memoirs) displays the entire range of conventions and resources of the genre to legitimate the assumption that the events narrated are real. Hence, an intrinsic criterion of deciding upon their reality or fictionality is extremely difficult to arrive at, which also explains why the “scandal” broke out only when journalists attempted to confirm Castaneda’s narratives by direct verification. One of this author’s undeniable narrative abilities is that of erasing or obliterating all the articulations and points of passage whereby reality might encroach upon the domain of fictionality. The fabric of his discourse is so densely homogeneous, that the reader finds himself slipping unawares, without ruptures or discontinuities, into situations that are normally deemed unacceptable by reason or by common sense.

The problem of reception raised by Castaneda’s “nonfictional” writings, in comparison with fiction *per se*, is not just a matter of crossing the threshold between aesthetics and ontology, but also one of channeling the reader’s intention. By the very convention that governs the author-reader relationship, fiction requires a “willing suspension of disbelief” (according to a well-known formula that has become a core concept in contemporary reader response theories). Through the fictional pact, the reader agrees not to assess a particular narrative by the criteria of empirical verification, but to receive it *as if* it were real or possible. Fairy tales, myths, fantastic literature or science fiction are not repudiated as lies for the very reason that they rely upon the convention of suspending positivist distrust.

In Castaneda’s case, the situation is the exact opposite. Being urged to approach the texts as accounts of real events, the reader eventually starts doubting their reality. What the reader undergoes is, if the pun is allowed, an “unwilling (most often unintended and indeliberate) suspension of belief”. Gradually or suddenly, the reader ceases to credit the genuineness of the narrative, and, with the frustration of a scam victim, starts casting accusations of deceit and falsehood at the text. What happens is that the reader seems to be willing to suspend his disbelief only when approaching a fictional text, while a non-fictional text seems to place his trust under permanent threat, as if, at the slightest incongruity, he would not hesitate to throw it overboard. The two reading pacts – fictional and non-fictional – operate thus in divergent manners, based on the fundamental premise encapsulated in the genre cues: Fiction or Nonfiction. It is as if the reader

had the innate reflex of always doing the reverse of what is asked of him: he is willing to bracket his distrust for narratives that are labeled fictional, but is cautious and prepared to withdraw his trust for narratives that are presented as real.

When there are no specific textual clues that might arouse the reader's suspicion, his "unwilling suspension of belief" is generated by a systemic shock: the conflict of visions or the conflict of interpretations. As an author, Castaneda juxtaposes two divergent viewpoints on the world: on the one hand, the Western positivist outlook, whose spokesman is Carlos, the protagonist, and on the other hand, Juan Matus's shamanistic-esoteric outlook. By spontaneously adhering to the apprentice's vision, the reader is willing to progress towards the master's vision, as long as certain similarities between them are maintained. Once the western system's possibilities of coherent explanation for the shamanic system are exhausted, however, the reader enters a state of confusion and bewilderment. In the absence of benchmarks whereby he might verify the things he has read about, the reader turns suspicious, skeptical, sarcastic and even aggressive. His incapacity to corroborate the narrated experiences with rational, positive explanations creates a state of intellectual or, perhaps, existential panic, for which the simplest solution is denial. Trust (or belief) is consistent with the commonly accepted explanatory script. Replacing this with a radically different explanatory script entails the suspension of belief or, in some cases, a *conversion*, in the sense of accepting the belief endorsed by the new script.

It is true that by comparison with other similar attempts of juxtaposing the positivist and the shamanistic perspectives, such as Mario Mercier's book, and his last chapter in particular,¹⁸ Castaneda succeeds in creating a bumper zone, an extraordinarily wide intersection area. Gliding from one paradigm to the other is extremely well managed, which means that the reader no longer comes to form a denying reaction of the kind "That is impossible, that I won't buy!" until much later, when he has already been trapped. It is this rather broad osmosis that impels us, in this study, to try to avoid falling into one or the other of the two realms (corresponding to the two types of reading invoked in the beginning, namely skeptical rejection or unquestioning adherence) and to remain as long as possible in the middle area, looking for the point where the two visions may intersect, or the geometrical place where they may come together.

Ethnomethodology and Emic Studies

The middle ground where Castaneda translates shamanic experiences into western concepts is largely constituted thanks to a method that is specific to contemporary ethnology: active or participative research (*recherche-action*). One of the solutions envisaged for solving the aporia

raised by the indeterminacy principle in ethnological studies (the mutual influence between the subject and the object of research) is the recognition, exposition and, thereafter, the instrumentation of this influence. Granted that ignoring the researcher's background represents a scientific illusion or utopia, postmodern anthropology has defined the concept of "implied researcher", whose presence becomes as important as that of the observed informant. From Michael Taussig to Susan Greenwood, participative research lays equal emphasis on the information that is received and on the responses to such information. The method of experiential investigation implies that the ethnologist (also) takes himself as a subject of investigation, starting from the assumption that an analysis of his own conduct when entering contact with a foreign culture is as revealing as the study of that culture itself.¹⁹

In other words, the participative method requires the researcher to identify as much as possible with his subjects, so as to ensure as accurate as possible a rendition of the phenomena under investigation. The practice of identifying oneself with a particular population (*going native*), of *getting inside the native's head*, of becoming a member of the examined culture (*acquiring membership*) has been subsumed under the term of *emic studies* (in contrast with *etic studies*). *Emic studies* classify the religious phenomena they analyze by respecting the terms of the ontological and psychological distinctions operated by that particular culture, while *etic studies* presuppose their translation into the conceptual apparatus of the observer's culture.²⁰

With the *emic studies* he have completed all the possible positions of the "benchmark" represented by the researcher in relationship with his/her object of study. In "positivist" ethnology, the researcher assumes and speaks in the name of his own culture (and cognitive paradigm); in "phenomenological" ethnology, the researcher sets about to become a *tabula rasa*, a neutral element in between cultures; finally, in "postmodern" ethnology, the researcher plunges into and tries to assimilate the living experience of the culture and beliefs of the population under study. The implied researcher is an immersed researcher, who programmatically allows himself to be transformed by his environment, who is inevitably permeated by these "cross-cultural encounters" and "extraordinary experiences".²¹ In the case of shamanism, for instance, this means that instead of observing and describing the shamanic trance from outside, the ethnographer accepts to be initiated into the techniques that will enable him to contact the world of the spirits.

Whether we approach his books as fictional or non-fictional, Carlos Castaneda is one of the pioneers and founders of the participative method. Without necessarily elaborating upon it in theoretical terms, he practices it concretely in his accounts, giving it substance. Carlos (the student in anthropology) explains his "spontaneous" adoption of the immersed position by his confessed (or mimed) incapacity to understand, in logical

and rational terms, don Juan's "teachings" and techniques. Simulating a modesty that appears to derive from common sense rather than from a researcher's deliberate decision, Castaneda confesses to being perplexed and overwhelmed by his informant and initiator's system of beliefs and practices. Such incomprehension goes beyond personal significance (an individual's lack of culture or horizons), becoming symptomatic of the problems and limits raised by the attempt to translate one cognitive paradigm into another.

Consequently, to ensure a maximum of scientific accuracy and probity, Castaneda pretends assuming the position of a researcher who does not try to "explain way" (in Lewis's terms) a system he simply cannot fathom. He affirms instead that he has almost naturally been forced to confine himself to describing his experiences as an apprentice. With the exception of the last chapter in the first volume, which is intended as a "structural analysis" (a rather modest and tedious one, for that matter) of Juan Matus's shamanistic vision, Castaneda does not set about to make a systemic and conceptual study, but to give an "ethnographic" report.²²

Castaneda outlines in the very introduction to the first volume the textual construction rules he will adopt (or mime). He pretends starting from his field notes taken either at the very moment when don Juan explains his teachings, or several hours or days after an experience (most often drug-induced) Carlos purportedly goes through. Castaneda claims that he composed his books later, at his own writing desk, by reorganizing the material from these notes, simplifying and condensing the dialogues, inserting details he has recollected in the meantime and granting the entire account a certain narrative dynamics.²³

Because he enlarges upon the process of reworking his notes, Castaneda actually becomes vulnerable to accusations of fabrication (the educated reader would prefer the raw, unpolished notes, as a somewhat more credible guarantee of authenticity); at the same time, however, he builds a subtle charade (for the case in which his books are fictional), offering the reader the possibility to motivate his incredulity not through the non-truth of the narrated experiences, but through the shortcomings and distortions of the later reworking process. Castaneda thus shifts the fabrication accusation from the content of his descriptions to their form. It is not the nature (real or invented) of the narrated experiences, but their discursive rendition that would then give his books a narrative, novelistic aspect. He ascribes the impression of the lack of verisimilitude to the anthropological species he writes – the so-called narrative anthropology, a species that has been newly created by postmodern ethnology.

In so far as his methodological position is concerned, Castaneda makes a "phenomenological" profession of faith in his early books. To him, the phenomenological attitude is the sole honest and acceptable approach to be adopted under the circumstances of perplexity and

incomprehension triggered by don Juan's "teachings": "The system I recorded was incomprehensible to me, thus the pretence to anything other than reporting about it would be misleading and impertinent. In this respect I have adopted the phenomenological method and have striven to deal with sorcery solely as phenomena that were presented to me. I, as the perceiver, recorded what I perceived, and at the moment of recording I endeavored to suspend judgment".²⁴

Very soon, however, Castaneda confesses that the "sorcery description of the world"²⁵ has come to overwhelm his own western vision. He professes to have abandoned any claim to systematizing and conceptualizing in scientific terms what his "benefactor" teaches him, and says he must "content" himself with a mere narrative transcription of events: "Due to the foreignness of the concepts and practices don Juan wanted me to understand and internalize, I have had no other choice but to render his teachings in the form of a narrative, a narrative of what happened, as it happened".²⁶ By this he admits that, professionally, he does not meet the criteria of scientific research, that "although I am an anthropologist, this is not strictly an anthropological work".²⁷

Castaneda thus contends that he has abandoned the neutrality of the phenomenological position and has adopted the position of the implied researcher instead. In his last book, he concedes (in the spirit of don Juan's teaching, whereby a "warrior" must assume his deeds) that he has succumbed to the major peril of the participative method, namely that of having been swallowed up by his object of study: "This book is dedicated to the two men who gave me the impetus and the tools to do anthropological fieldwork: Professor Clement Meighan and Professor Harold Garfinkel. Following their suggestions, I plunged into a field situation from which I never emerged. If I failed to fulfill the spirit of their teaching, so be it. I couldn't help it. A greater force, which shamans call *infinity*, swallowed me before I could formulate clear-cut social scientists' propositions".²⁸ So, Carlos' voyage from the culture of the investigator into the culture of the investigated has proved to be irreversible.

Judged in itself, Castaneda's statement from above may be taken both as the recognition in good faith of professional failure and as a subtle technique of manipulating the reader; hence, as a mechanism of creating the illusion of reality. By giving up his attributes as an anthropologist, Castaneda apparently makes a gesture of humility, of contrition. From the very start, he disappoints his educated readers, who were expecting his books to be "serious" ethnological studies of shamanism, like Eliade's, Opler's or Meyerhoff's, for instance. By showing his own scientific limits, however, he does nothing but attempt to regain the educated readers, who are somehow urged to express their discontent towards his ethnological incompetence but to further credit his "naïve" narrative discourse.

This is a very subtle ploy, like a chess gambit, whereby Castaneda sacrifices his books' scientific respectability to their existential

“authenticity”. As I have already shown, the stakes of these texts overstep the boundaries of both the fictional and the scientific genres, demanding the reader’s personal, ontological involvement. At a closer look, it is obvious that Castaneda does not fail in his anthropological venture, albeit he loses his academic credibility. He uses the methods of postmodern ethnology (the suspension of judgment, *emic* studies, the implied observer, narrative anthropology, etc.) to create a strategy of existential authentication for what he narrates about. These techniques, which were unconventional forty years ago, did, however, “hover in the air”, and Castaneda simply exploited a trend on its way of becoming legitimated, in order to scientifically endorse his accounts, which the Western system of thought threatened to thrust aside. Certain commentators, like Stephen Murray, have even asked themselves whether the volumes on don Juan represent a sort of *breaching experiment* specific to ethnomethodology, a deconstructivist project which demonstrates our incapacity to tell the difference between fiction and ethnograph.²⁹ Given the importance experiential research has gained in contemporary anthropology, it has paradoxically become the gateway through which Castaneda’s books, if they are fictional indeed, could force their becoming accepted by scientist circles. To claim that, having been overwhelmed by the events, you will relinquish interpreting them and do your best to render them as they happened seems a perfect gesture of good faith.

Psychoanalysis

Still, if everything were fabrication, why would Castaneda do all this? And, more importantly, why do so many readers let themselves be won over or “deceived” by him? The explanations at hand, reminiscent of the motivations of hoaxers in general (Castaneda started making up things to acquire scientific titles and an academic status, to get fame, to seduce women from his circle of disciples and, last but not least, to earn copyrights and obtain money, etc.) are not sufficient either from the author’s perspective, or from that of his readership. In the case of an ordinary fraudster, the public would have quickly reacted with the frustration of someone who has been deceived. In Castaneda’s case, though, it is evident that an undeclared pact has formed between him and his “naïve” readers, which can only be explained through both the author’s and his public’s *desire to believe*.

However we might approach them, Castaneda’s writings are too profound to be mere forgeries. Even though we might not believe in the existence of the supranature they propound, they put forth a philosophy of life which can have a human effectiveness, of the sort that is found, say, in treatises of moral or Christian stoicism. Although we may not take for granted the reality of the energetic universe described by don Juan, it has

the complexity and sophistication of a metaphysical system, such as those construed by Leibniz, Hegel, Schopenhauer.

Moreover, had he been a mere hoaxer, Castaneda would not have experienced, as he indeed did, his own fabrications. We would be unable to understand why Castaneda came to shape his life *as if* he had really been don Juan's apprentice, putting into practice the spiritual techniques described in his own books: for example, "the erasure of personal history" or "becoming inaccessible to others." Since he started writing his books, Castaneda lived immersed in his own world and modified his existence according to his "fabrications", which places the simplistic accusation of charlatanism in an altogether different light.

To carry this analysis further, after having enlisted reception theory, postmodern ethnology or fictional worlds theory to our argument, we might also resort to psychoanalysis. In *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène*, Octave Mannoni takes over and develops a concept created by Freud, namely *Verleugnung* (refusal, denial), applying it to the ambivalent relation between man and the supernatural. From this vantage point, modern man's skepticism towards religious and mystical experiences does not appear as a simple distrust of "puerile" assumptions, but as the refusal and denial of a certain problematic reality, either external or internal in nature. Although it would be an interesting subject to tackle, we have neither the space nor the expertise to interrogate on the causes which have led to the modern world's divorce from religion and to the foreclosure of the sacred. What we can do, however, is trace the consequences of this collective trauma on the behavior of individuals.

Octave Mannoni shows that the little fantastic stories adults enact for their children (Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, the child-bringing stork, etc.) are commonly attributed to the diachronic explanation that children's age is resonant with humanity's "childhood", which allows for myths and religious beliefs to be taken for fairy tales. However, the French psychoanalyst proposes another explanation, a synchronic one, which stipulates that, "as an exterior and present figure, [the child] can play a by no means neglectable role of assuming our repudiated beliefs".³⁰ In other words, it is not only children, but also parents who emotionally invest in the figure, say, of Santa Claus, albeit the latter do so in a roundabout manner, through projection. No longer allowing themselves to believe in Santa Claus, the parents enact the show of Santa's arrival so that they can also vicariously rejoice in it, through the child's reactions. It is a question of satisfying by surrogate a denied, forbidden joy, which we were compelled to give up at some point during our "maturation" process.

In such cases a conflict may appear between a rational, empirical, pragmatic superego and an infantile ego (or even subego), who continues thinking in magical terms. Modern man has adopted the position of the skeptical superego, who mocks at the "imaginary gullible", demoting him as infantile, primitive or mentally ill. Repression, however, does not

exclude the possibility of the return of the magical ego. In this sense, Octave Mannoni analyses a scene from Casanova's memoirs, in which the cynical illuminist (an "esprit fort"), posing as a magician to ridicule and swindle the "fools" around him, falls into his own trap. A skeptic, Casanova does not believe in the supernatural and in demons, but one stormy night, when he attempts to impress his credulous audience by giving an incantation in a forest, he is himself frightened by certain phenomena of "synchronicity" (as Jung might call them) and has to flee in terror. Faced with primitive anguish, the rationalist system Casanova has positioned himself in is shattered to pieces.

In order to theorize upon such a return of the repressed, Octave Manoni uses a certain syntagm: "Je sais bien que..., mais quand même...", "I know but to well that..., and yet...". Casanova knows very well that there are no demons, and yet... Modern man's attitude towards occult phenomena is very much characterized by denial and its related culpability, as well as by the fear that what has been denied will return. "I know only too well that divination and astrology are fallacious premises and yet, on the morning when the zodiac foretells an accident for me, I feel a pang on getting out of the house". What we have rejected on a rational basis returns in the shape of anxiety: "And still, what if it is true?" (This is not the place to dwell on the complications of the hypothesis whereby our apprehension itself is what makes us, involuntarily, to bring about the event we fear.) By chance or not, Taisha Abelar, a member of Castaneda's sorcerers party, reproduces the above-quoted denial formula almost identically when she refers to the shamans' programmatic optimism about the success of their quest: "I know it's useless, I know it's impossible, and still, and still..."³¹

Don Juan's "teachings" provoke similar reactions. The naïve and the educated readers from reception theory find their correspondents in the magical (sub)ego and rational superego from psychoanalysis. Skeptical readers are those who identify with the rational superego, refusing, for various reasons, which are not only cognitive and educational, to take Castaneda's "fictions" and "fabrications" for granted. Naïve readers abandon from the very beginning the rational position and give themselves up to the phantasmatic pleasure of believing that everything that is narrated is possible. The operative syntagm "Je sais bien que, mais quand même..." enables us to overcome the depleting antinomy we signaled at the beginning of our study, since it highlights the fact that the two positions, the gullible and the skeptical, are not exclusive but locked up in a dynamic interdependency.

What we may do is become our own guinea pigs, using ourselves as objects of study for analyzing what reactions Castaneda's books trigger in their readers. "I know only too well that don Juan's teachings are invented," says my rational ego; "and still...", my magical ego adds, "what if they were true? What would it mean if Castaneda were telling the

truth?” The anguish aroused by this simple naïve hypothesis suggests that an irrational nucleus gestates within us, which our superego has only partially managed to subdue. If our positivist intellect does not have sufficient authority to make us ignore Castaneda’s books from the start, then our reading will progress, accompanied by a culpable curiosity, by a sense of the forbidden, by an absurd hope that the magical might truly exist. “I know I am not doing the right thing by abandoning skepticism, but it is so pleasant and exciting to allow myself to believe, for one moment, that these things are possible...” While our superego demands us to suspend our belief, our infantile ego compels us, complicitously, to suspend our disbelief. This doubling allows us to believe in a cleaved manner: the positivist superego is convinced that everything is a hoax, and yet the magical ego wants to believe and hopes everything could be real.

Castaneda’s books are like litmus paper for the schizoid faultline tormenting modern man. The ultimate cause of this traumatism may reside in the fact that scientism and positivism have left us defenseless in the face of the anguish of death. Ever since it voided transcendence and denied the afterworld, modernity has failed to find an appropriate affective and symbolic solution for the fear of nothingness. The promise made by Castaneda’s sorcerers is exactly that of transcending death by accessing a state of hyperconsciousness, by lighting the “fire from within”. Like all religions, Juan Matus’s postmodern shamanism brings the “annunciation” of our possibility to avoid death.

A brief psychobiography

Staying in the realm of psychoanalysis, we might of course ask what impelled Castaneda himself to elaborate these phantasms within such a complex system. Does the author have a subconscious motivation for erecting this sophisticated edifice? It would be difficult to psychoanalyze Castaneda, given the manner in which he conceals and mystifies his biography. Unlike many other authors who expose their most intimate experiences and events in journals and memoirs, supplying ample material for analysis, Castaneda applies to himself one of the principles of shamanic life recommended by Juan Matus, that of “erasing personal history.” “A great liar”, a “bullshitter”, as Castaneda defines himself (with false modesty?), he manages to envelop his life in a thick, almost impenetrable mist.

And still, this very desire for mystification can be read as a symptom. No matter how few things we know about the “real” Castaneda, one thing is certain, namely that he himself does not know or does not want anyone to know who the “real” Castaneda is. His books are the testimony of a perseverant effort of identity reconstruction. Whoever and however Castaneda might have been as a child and a teenager, it is clear that this

identity does not satisfy him, that the mature man wants to be and eventually becomes someone else. About his teacher, Carlos comes to say that he is an impersonal, “void” being, whose inner emptiness “doesn’t reflect the world, but reflects infinity” (“Who was Juan Matus, really?”).³² Assuming the posture of the *naqual*, of a shaman who has inherited the teachings of his master, Castaneda can say the same thing about himself, that his apprenticeship as a sorcerer has voided his biography and history, that he has denied his contingent ego, that he has become impersonal.

Notwithstanding all this, despite the obstacles raised by the author, several traces of the trauma that caused his flight from himself can be detected in his books. As these attest, his mother, Susana Castaneda died when the child was six, and the father, Cesar Arana, a young man at the time, left him in his grandparents’ care. In his rare childhood recollections, Castaneda indeed tells about growing up in his grandparents’ extended family, surrounded by numerous aunts and cousins, but in the absence of his biological parents. It may be inferred that this situation induced a feeling of insecurity and abandonment in him, a complex of the deserted child. Infantile psychoanalysis highlights the importance of the parents’ figures in creating identity benchmarks and in shaping the child’s personality. Their absence most often results in characterial disorientation and in an acute uncertainty as regards the self’s entrenchment in the world.

The mother’s phantasm rarely haunts Castaneda’s volumes. A remarkable, though indirect, evocation of her figure appears in the second volume, *A Separate Reality*, where, during a *mitote* (a collective shamanic session where peyote is ingested), Carlos hears himself called by his mother’s voice and then has a vision of her. Fantasized or not, the apparition has a real numinous, hypnotic charge. The filial sentiments this hallucinatory encounter reveals to him are mixed and ambiguous (“the horrendous burden of my mother’s love”), seconded by the shocking realization that he has never loved her.³³ Behind this denial seems to be a still unresolved affective problem: his anger and the infantile reproach for having been abandoned, even through death, by his mother.

On the other hand, the father’s figure has a somewhat richer occurrence. The author also seems to have some “old” accounts he must settle here, some reproaches to make and some discontents to reveal from his childhood years. In *Journey to Ixtlan*, when he discusses with don Juan about the necessity to assume the responsibility for one’s own decisions, the author brings his father as a counterexample. During the holidays he spent with his son, we are told, Cesar Arana constantly made plans to go to the swimming pool at six in the morning, but never managed to wake up on time. The conclusion Carlos formulates “almost yelling” (and betraying thus the emotional charge of the recollection) is that “my father was weak, and so was his world of ideal acts that he never performed”.³⁴

Don Juan immediately senses Carlos's mismanagement of feelings and asks him why he has never told his father in the face what he reproached him for. Such liberating communication would only occur much later, in the absence of his real father. In another *mitote* described in the first volume, Carlos faces his father's ghost to whom, for the first time, he manages to tell "staggering things about my feelings toward him, things I would never have been able to voice under ordinary circumstances".³⁵ In the last volume of Castaneda's "endecatalogue", when he is confronted with the terrifying perspective of a predatory universe where humans are victims, and when he manages to assume the condition of a fighter which don Juan offers him as a model, Carlos is finally capable of casting a detached, understanding and even compassionate glance upon his father: "My poor father, the most considerate being I knew, so tender, so gentle, so helpless".³⁶ It is a sign that the experiences, whether real or imaginary, narrated throughout the eleven volumes have covered an entire inner path, from frustration to liberation, from self-pity to accepting his destiny, from Oedipal resentment to a mature reconciliation with his father and all his weaknesses. Strangely, the catharsis experienced by Castaneda during his apprenticeship seems to reiterate, in terms close to psychoanalysis, the theme of the "shamanic malady." Carlos's narratives thus confirm Mircea Eliade's and other ethnologists' observations whereby initiation is a form of therapy for the psychic disorders the shamanistic vocation announces.

While plausible to a certain extent, this explanation has a great drawback. Some authors may credit Castaneda's autobiography, but others have shown that Carlos's mother only died when he was twenty-two, which invalidates the theory of infantile trauma. If that is the case, the question arises: Why does Carlos feel the need to "kill" his mother prematurely in his books?

The most economical hypothesis is that the young Castaneda remained trapped inside an Oedipal complex, that he did not manage, as psychoanalysts say, to "resolve his Oedipus." While during early childhood, love toward his mother is ingenuous and unconflictual, once the boy develops sexually and enters puberty, his attraction towards the mother, with its accompanying incest taboo and castration anxiety, becomes an anxiogenic pulsion, capable of generating neuroses.

One of the child's possible reactions for blocking the Oedipal anguish is that of adopting a regressive attitude. He imaginarily refuses to grow up, wishing to remain his mother's child forever, and avoiding thus his turning into an incestuous son. The refusal of a mature position, more specifically that of a husband and a son, is a profound reflex that can be detected in Castaneda's biography and books. Richard de Mille shows that Castaneda's arrival in the United States looks like a flight from paternity. Carlos apparently left Lima, where he was a student in the Belles Arts, after his Chinese-Peruvian girlfriend Dolores announced him that she was pregnant. He was only to see his daughter from this relation about twenty

years later, when she quickly left him, returning to Latin America for good. Carlos's marriage to his first American wife, Margaret Runyan Castaneda, would also not last more than one year. Barbara Myerhoff, a brilliant anthropologist, Castaneda's mate during studentship, brings yet another piece of evidence to the "file". She recounts the shock undergone by Castaneda when she disclosed to him she was pregnant. According to her, Carlos had a reaction of mystic fear, accusing her that by conceiving that child she had kidnapped or captured the soul of her shaman subject, Ramón Medina, who had recently been murdered.

The "magical" accusation dropped by Carlos to Barbara betrays an acute repulsion towards procreation, as a possible reflex of the Oedipal complex and the anxiety of incest. This reaction will be thematized in "don Juan's teachings." In *The Second Ring of Power*, La Gorda and the other apprentice sorcerers explain to Carlos that any birth implies a diminution of the parents' energetic resources and leads to the emergence of certain black stains or holes in their luminous auras; furthermore, recuperating their plenitude presupposes retrieving the luminous fibers from their children. The same complex probably also governs the extraordinary eulogy Castaneda's sorcerers bring to menstruation. While most religions and myths regard the menstrual cycle as a state of impurity which must be placed under ritualistic quarantine, Juan Matus shows that the period of menstruation brings women closest to the threshold of the other world, enabling them to experience visions and transcendence that are inaccessible to men. Read in a psychoanalytical grid, this theory of sorcery may be understood as a plea against procreation and pregnancy.

The regressive attitude subliminally maintains the individual in an infantile mental condition, or in what Jacques Lacan calls the imaginary, or the world of the mother, in opposition with the symbolical, or the world of the father. Castaneda's relish for fiction-making and for fabulation can be explained through his magical mentality, which the adult has refused to become detached from. The world of don Juan's "teachings" (or "lies") has assembled into an escapist imaginary universe, where infantile fears are compensated through grandiose projections of the self. Barbara Myerhoff recollects the moments spent with Castaneda during the troubled, stressful academic years, as a "child's game": "It was as though we entered a bubble of pretending and playfulness together. It was an intimacy made out of impossibility and weirdness. And it was an escape from the ordeal we were going through [...] There was a lot of poking and giggling. Romping almost. We had a kind of omnipotent, aggrandized view of ourselves, which we also laughed at. [...] We kept telling each other we were the serious, important, imaginative, powerful ones, and all those others, those idiots who were torturing us, were the crazy ones".³⁷ Can Castaneda's volumes and their tremendous success represent his solution and response to the stress inflicted by both social

authorities (all the harsher, given his status as an immigrant) and his own anxieties?

Within the Oedipal complex, the repressed attraction towards the mother combines with a competitive, aggressive attitude towards the father. That Castaneda's phantasmatic relationship with his father was conflictual is best suggested by the fact that the son legitimates himself using his mother's name (Castaneda), not his father's (Aranha or Arana). Castaneda explains his name change through the fact that in the Hispano-Latin culture, the mother's family name is placed after the father's family name and that, on his arrival in the States, he gave up the middle name in Carlos Aranha Castaneda.³⁸ This is attested in many other cases, such as that of Gabriel García Márquez, who is mostly known by his second name, few non-Hispanic people being aware that his paternal family name is García, not Márquez. From a psychoanalytical perspective, however, replacing a patronym with a matronym betrays a downright rebellion against paternal ascendancy and a symbolical denial of the father figure. Through his name, Carlos Castaneda disavows himself from Carlos Aranha, in his pursuit of a new identity.

In such a situation, Jacques Lacan would diagnose a massive disturbance of the function known as the "name of the father" (*nom-du-père*). The absence or the decay of the paternal point of reference in the child's psyche prevents its passage from the "imaginary regime" to the "symbolical regime", that is acquiring the specifically human ability to discriminate between the significant and the signified, between thought and the objects that are thought about, between phantasms and representations. In the absence of the ordering "law" guaranteed by the paternal imago, Lacan shows, the child continues to perceive the world in the magical and fabulous terms of the "imaginary regime". Seen from this angle, Castaneda's books testify not only to his extraordinary capacity to fantasize, but also to his lack of desire to delineate between fantasy and reality. If we were to look for a psychiatric diagnosis here, the closest term for this would be *pseudologia fantastica*, a syndrome that would apply to mentally disturbed people who believe in their own stories and fabrications.

In Freud terms, the presence of a parental model ensures the function of the superego. In Castaneda's case, the need for a father is confirmed by his ceaseless quest for people whom he can admire and follow. On several occasions when he "sums up" his own life, Carlos recollects several friendships and relationships to which he was fully committed. Each of these people represent masters worthy of imitation, however strange and hazardous the adventures they draw him in. One of them is Armando Velez, a friend who, at the age of ten, lures him into a crazy expedition down a subterranean river, when all the odds are against their returning safely from it. Another is Leandro Acosta, an eccentric adult who convinces little Carlos to catch a live eagle by hiding inside the

skin of a dead donkey.³⁹ It is difficult to tell whether the two happenings are real or invented, but both contain a very clear-cut initiatory script, a *descensus ad inferos* and a shamanistic gestation inside the skin of a totemic animal. More significant is the fact that the narrator rests on these scenes centered around the figures of individuals who are admired without reservations but who are suddenly abandoned the moment his enthrallment subsides.

The university professors from UCLA are particularly fascinating for Castaneda. The prototype for the master-disciple relationship, exclusively endorsed by the latter, is Professor Lorca. His lectures on cognitive philosophy seem to offer the anthropology student rational answers to all the problems of incommunicability and incomprehension experienced in the field. Carlos worships his professor, faithfully attends all his classes, absorbs all his words and ideas, overlooks his eccentricities and accepts even his indifference: "I went religiously to his office during his office hours, but he never seemed to have any time for me. But even though I couldn't speak to him, I admired him unbiasedly. I even accepted that he would never talk to me".⁴⁰ Judging by the way he is presented here, Professor Lorca could have been the perfect master if his admirer had dedicated himself to intellectual research and to academic life.

In fact, however, Professor Lorca is also abandoned by his disciple as he sets about looking for other masters, and only serves as a contrast figure to the truly numinous presence of Juan Matus. Compared with don Juan's abysmal wisdom and experience, Professor Lorca appears as a hilarious pedant, lost in his own verbosity. In the terms of shamanistic teachings, Professor Lorca does nothing but set up the *tonal* (our current perception), while don Juan explores the mysteries of the *nagual*, of the parallel realities that surround us. A "traveller-warrior", Juan Matus opens Carlos's gates to unknown worlds within himself and in the universe. He is the absolute master. The truth is that a more complete, more powerful, more irradiant master figure is hard to find in the entire world literature. Juan Matus is what Jung calls a *mana personality*, a sage coming from the depths of time, possessing tremendous inner energy and an exquisite control over the supernatural, precision and an impeccable style of guiding his apprentices, human warmth and an irresistible sense of humor.

Did don Juan truly exist? The reporters and the curious people who set out scouring the south of the United States and Mexico have not managed to track the shaman down, and none of Castaneda's acquaintances, except for the other "apprentice sorceresses", has been able to confirm his existence. It is no less true that Castaneda himself claims that Juan Matus left this world in 1974.

If we adopt the skeptics' point of view, whereby don Juan is a fictional character, then he appears to us as a formidable condensation of Castaneda's own phantasms. As Barbara Myerhoff surmises, her friend

may have developed a sort of multiple or split personality in his books: “Don Juan is clearly the *Other* for Carlos. [...] [This interpretation] appeals to me, because I have a hard time reconciling the Carlos I knew, or think I knew, with the one who is supposed to be a hardboiled, manipulative deceiver. Don Juan may be a subpersonality, or a personification of a part of Carlos that was underdeveloped and could be developed and manifested in the stories”.⁴¹

In Jungian terms, Juan Matus is the personification of a collective archetype, that of the “old sage” or of the “self”, perhaps. From this angle, we may assume that throughout his volumes, Castaneda progressively builds a compensatory image, meant to substitute the paternal imago. He manages to handle the Oedipal complex by elaborating what Freud calls a “family narrative”, a fiction whereby the image of an ideal father is erected instead of the real father. Don Juan is the perfect father and master, the one Carlos has desired and dreamed of. He embodies all the features the child has been deprived of: wisdom, self-possession and self-control, as well as mystical fulfillment. It is as if Castaneda has (re)built himself, offering himself a phantasmatic model, inventing a character who materializes the primordial image of the old sage, defined by Jung as a personification of our race’s ancestral experience. Castaneda has given himself a guide for his inner evolution, has built a paternal image that can provide him with a “law of the father” and steers him towards self-fulfillment and self-realization. This explains both the importance don Juan plays for Castaneda’s inner balance (albeit devoid of physical materiality, he does have a psychical reality teeming with implications and consequences) and the numinous fascination that this *mana personality* exerts on the readers.

Moving the discussion from the level of the author onto that of the reader, Juan Matus may be said to be a figure who personifies an archetype or a complex of (post)modern man. Castaneda updates and adapts a recurrent figure in the world history of religions and civilizations for the sensibility and horizon of expectations of contemporary Western societies: the mystical guide, the holy man, the guru, or the religious master. In this sense, don Juan and Carlos act as religion (or mystique) founders – a New Age type of religion, of course. Don Juan’s “teachings” talk about an alternative way of self-fulfillment in terms that are, if not downright credible, full of genuine phantasmatic and emotional overweight. What Carlos Castaneda makes, one might say, is a religious offer which answers our disabused and disenchanting culture’s subconscious expectations, after it has repressed its opening to faith. He inserts himself in the magical breach between hesitation and the guilty conscience comprised in the formula: “I know only too well that don Juan is a fabricated character, and still...”

Making belief

Perhaps, however, it is time we reversed this very expression of denial. Let us not focus only on the repressed expectations and the flickering of magical thought which bustle in the dim shade of “and still...”, but also on the arrogant certainty with which we formulate the judgment – well-supported empirically and rationally – whereby Juan Matus and his teachings are mere fiction. This apparently irrefutable judgment raises several issues. If everything is sheer invention, we may think we are dealing either with a lucid fiction, built ludically or, perhaps, cynically, or with a phantasm experienced by the author in a hallucinatory manner. In the first case, we may ask ourselves whether a charlatan can live his scam so intensely that he transforms it into a life philosophy, and put it into practice over the course of almost forty years. What charlatan would have the motivation and the power to apply these spiritual techniques (such as the erasure of personal history, or isolation from the others), which presuppose a continuous life effort and, more than that, a sense of one’s own destiny?

A fib that can grant teleological orientation to a man’s life must have very deep subconscious roots. In that case, however, we ought to imagine Castaneda suffering from a form of systematic delirium, of *pseudologia fantastica* perhaps. The way in which he identifies with and experiences his phantasms should make us regard his books as psychotic documents. “Becoming inaccessible” to the ones around you turns from a spiritual technique into a conceptualized relapse into the autism of your imaginary universe. The history of culture offers us several examples of great authors who abandoned themselves to schizophrenia and delirium, leaving behind works that document their path towards the darkest recesses. Such a hypothesis nevertheless raises a disturbing question: if we accept that Castaneda’s works are rooted in a hysterical or psychotic nucleus, is this really what the writings of a “madman” look like? How can they contain so much wisdom, sophistication, coherence, humor, when the malady process is usually the reverse, following the path of ideational, imaginary and expressive impoverishment and incongruity?

Another intriguing question relates to the “*nagual* party” around Castaneda. Following the example set by the group of sorcerers led by don Juan (the “old *nagual*”), Carlos (the “new *nagual*”) managed to bring together a team of three sorceresses: Carol Tiggs, Florinda Donner and Taisha Abelar. These women are real, they cannot be said to be fictional characters, since they are part of Castaneda’s quite real entourage and they have contributed to setting up the Cleargreen association and the Tensegrity school. Moreover, two of them have also written books in which they recount their own initiation into shamanism by don Juan’s sorcerers. In *The Sorcerers’ Crossing*, Taisha Abelar claims that she was

trained to become a “stalker” through the techniques of recapitulation and magical passes, while in *Being-in-Dreaming* Florinda Donner describes her own initiation into becoming a “dreamer”. What exactly is this about? Is literary charlatanism spinning out of control, with new authors capitalizing on a successful story? (Just like *Star Wars* generated an entire writing industry?) Or is Castaneda’s *pseudologia fantastica* unleashing a mass psychosis, an unceasing collective delirium?

Since these women have been associated with the “new nagual” since the 1970s, I do not think their narratives can be dismissed as mere literary fictions of the self. As they also began to “live a myth”, they modified their existence in a strange flight from (or quest for) identity. Every one of them changed their names: Regine Margarita Thal became Florinda Donner; Anna Marie Carter reinvented herself as Taisha Abelar; and Kathleen Pohlman successively took on the names of Muni Alexander, Elizabeth Austin and, eventually, Carol Tiggs. In 1993, at an interval of two months, Castaneda married two of them, but in the testament he drew prior to his death no wife is mentioned.⁴² His death from cancer was kept secret for a while by the “party” of sorceresses, who also disappeared several years later as if having made “the leap into infinity”. Do they practice the “erasure of personal history”? Or is it a question of breaking the limits society is willing to accept in cases of self-redefinition, a transgression that is likely to generate anxiety thrills, since it suggests not merely psychological lability, but also a dangerous game with one’s own life and personality?

Consequently, we may ask ourselves if the explanation we sketched above – the yaqui master as a projection of Carlos’s and of his party’s paternal phantasm – is not in itself a form of appeasing denial for our conscience as modern individuals. Is recourse to psychoanalytical explanations not a way of avoiding confrontation with the material which Castaneda subconsciously activates? By suggesting that Juan Matus is a collective *imago* and that Castaneda is a neurotic with a penchant for writing, we may be once again isolating (a little more subtly this time) a radioactive ontological nucleus into the quarantine area of common sense. We may be relegating to the realm of phantasms a content that deserves investigation as a living creature and not as a mummy trapped inside the ammonite of logic. If we (psycho)analyze Castaneda (and his party), we protect ourselves, the empirical and atheist Western individuals, when in fact it would be more honest to query our own intentions and ask why we feel the need for psychoanalytical explanations.

But perhaps we need not resort to the premise of psychotic or neurotic disturbance. Recent studies on theatricality and gaming offer us non-medical, hence non-pejorative interpretations for “pretending” and role-playing in society. Thus, commenting on performances in daily life, Richard Schechner distinguishes between two functions of representations: *to make believe* (making others believe) and *to make belief*

(creating belief in the reality of something).⁴³ Children's games and theatre or cinema acting roles are therefore seen as "make-believe" performances, in which the participants are aware that they are "pretending" and let the others know this through various signals and conventions. Professional, gender or ethnic roles, on the other hand, are "make-believe" performances, in which the distance between reality and fiction, between actor and character, has been erased. Public figures, from politicians to opinion formers and religious leaders, "stage" situations and representations whereby they persuade themselves and their public of the seriousness of the message they convey. This is also the case of Carlos Castaneda, who, despite his personal reservations, has become a public figure (physical presence is not a prerequisite of publicity), a religious prophet in an age in which even epiphanies must use the mass-media means and channels.

In a world in which fiction becomes an instrument of constructing reality, Castaneda's texts, albeit fictional, have the power to impose a reality. The author himself defines his books as research and allegory, which leads Richard de Mille to call Castaneda's project as "ethnomethodoallegory". An inveterate defender of separating the two types of discourse, Mille obviously relies entirely on the gap between the literal meaning (which should render a true reality veridically) and the allegorical meaning (which may sever the cord of veracity with the world).

From this perspective, even though Castaneda's books are not literally true, they might be allegorically true. Going in even more depth, one might say that even if falsely related to the "real" world, his allegory is truly related to our psychological world. Barbara Myerhoff has very well pointed out that Castaneda's power of seduction resides in the imaginary concreteness of his accounts: "One reason people get so upset when you call [Castaneda] a hoaxer is that he teaches them in a concrete if allegorical form. His story comes to them as direct experience. *Zap!* It hits them, and they know it's right. [...] So you are attacking not just him but their own private experience, which has truth value for them".⁴⁴ We are in a situation in which the fictional account purveys a psychological truth, and the power of imaginary representation surpasses the benchmarks meant to certify external reality.

The methodological trap

All in all, it appears that our "postmodern shaman" has managed to transform participative ethnography into a sort of Moebius strip. Castaneda traps ethnology and the history of religions inside a circular reasoning that is reminiscent of the "Cretan's paradox". If we honestly accept the *emic* approach in good faith, what reason would we have to reject Carlos's accounts?

Castaneda's methodological trap for us has several levels:

1. Castaneda has been contested on the grounds that he is a charlatan who fools his readers. Is this, however, not what the positivist ethnologists used to say about the shamans who healed through suction, for example? Methodological and existential prudence, which requires the ethnologist to take his subject's experiences seriously, prohibits him to look down upon texts that claim to describe a religious initiation.

2. If Castaneda is neither a simple impostor and a charlatan who lies to his public, but a maniac who comes to believe in his own phantasms and rebuild his life and identity around them, then he can be psychoanalyzed with a view to detecting his Oedipal complex, his regressive and infantile behavior and his *pseudologia fantastica*. Is it not, however, through mental disturbance (hysteria, neurosis, multiple personality, etc.) that positivist scholars have tried to explain away the shamans' trance or possession experiences? A similar psychological and anthropological prudence that forbids them to cast judgments on the reality of the spirits described by the shamans also compels us not to hastily put any psychiatric diagnoses in Castaneda's case.

3. Even if this author were a hoaxer or a mentally disturbed individual, his message has apparently convinced both his group of intimate collaborators (the *nagual* party) and a large mass of followers. In other words, he has become a social religious phenomenon. Can an ethnologist and historian of religions discard a religious movement on account that its initiator is a charlatan or, at best, an enlightened individual (such as were the founders of Gnostic sects, like Simon the Magus, for instance)? Can he distinguish between the "truthfulness" of a religious prophet and the "falsehood" of Tensegrity's creator?

Even though we may be personally skeptical about the objective "reality" of Castaneda's narrative, *emic* relativism compels us to accept that it has at least a subjective reality for the author and for his group of adepts; we should therefore take this group psychology phenomenon seriously. The fact that the shamanism preached by Castaneda is not traditional (as validated and endorsed by ethnology and the history of religions) but postmodern (combining, in a New Age manner, spiritualist philosophy and tradition with parapsychology and scientism) does not definitively exclude its religious character. Even though we will never practice tensegrity and the magical passes, are we in a position to cast the "stone of skepticism" at "religious charlatanism"?

Notes:

¹ Richard de Mille, "Allegory is not Ethnobotany: Analyzing Castaneda's Letter to R. Gordon Wasson and Carlos's Spanish Field notes", in *The Don Juan Papers: further Castaneda controversies*, ed. Richard de Mille (Santa Barbara: Ross-Irikson Publishers, 1981).

- ² Hans Sebald, "Roasting Rabbits in Tularemia or The Lion, the Witch and the Horned Toad", in *The Don Juan Papers: further Castaneda controversies*, ed. Richard de Mille (Santa Barbara: Ross-Irikson Publishers, 1981).
- ³ Mille, 18-19.
- ⁴ Mille, 10, 13.
- ⁵ Ioan Petru Culianu, *Călătorii în lumea de dincolo*, (București: Nemira, 1994), 72.
- ⁶ See Dave Kehr, in *International Herald Tribune*, 16 (June 2004): 11.
- ⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Ocultism, vrăjitorie și mode culturale. Eseuri de religie comparată*. (București, Humanitas, 1997).
- ⁸ Andrew Newberg et al., *Why God Won't Go Away. Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).
- ⁹ Concha Labarta, in *Mas Allá*, (April, 1997), Spain.
- ¹⁰ See Corin Braga, "Positivist, Phenomenological and Experiential Anthropology", in *Orientation in the Occurrence*, ed. István Berszán, (Cluj-Napoca, Komp-Press – Korunk, 2009), 254-263.
- ¹¹ In Mille, 42.
- ¹² I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic religion. A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), 24.
- ¹³ Elsa First, in Mille, 39-40.
- ¹⁴ Mary Douglas, "The Authenticity of Castaneda", in Mille, 30.
- ¹⁵ Mille, 44-45.
- ¹⁶ Paul Riesman, "Fictions of Art and of Science or Does It Matter Whether don Juan Really Exists?", in Mille, 211.
- ¹⁷ Barbara G. Myerhoff, in Mille, 339-340.
- ¹⁸ Mario Mercier, *Șamanism și șamani*, (Iași, Editura Moldova, 1993).
- ¹⁹ For the transition from positivist-quantitative to qualitative folkloristics, see Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, "Folkloristics, Ethnology and Anthropology at the Beginning of Millennium. A Hundred Years of Folklore Studies", *Symposia. Caiete de etnologie și antropologie*, (Craiova, Aius, 2003).
- ²⁰ Mille, 85-86.
- ²¹ D. Young and J.-G. Goulet (eds.), *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, (Peterborough: Broadviews Press, 1994).
- ²² Castaneda, *A Separate Reality. Further Conversations with Don Juan*, 15.
- ²³ Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, 25.
- ²⁴ Castaneda, *A Separate Reality. Further Conversations with Don Juan*, 15.
- ²⁵ Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan. The Lessons of Don Juan*, XIII.
- ²⁶ Castaneda, *The Fire From Within*, IX.
- ²⁷ Castaneda, *The Eagle's Gift*, 1.
- ²⁸ Castaneda, *The Active Side of Infinity*, 3.
- ²⁹ Stephen Murray, in Mille, 71.
- ³⁰ Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre scène*, (Paris, Seuil, 1969), 18.
- ³¹ Taisha Abelar, *The Sorcerers' Crossing*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1992), 13.
- ³² Castaneda, *The Active Side of Infinity*, 73.
- ³³ Castaneda, *A Separate Reality. Further Conversations with Don Juan*, 56.
- ³⁴ Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan. The Lessons of Don Juan*, 41.
- ³⁵ Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, 147.
- ³⁶ Castaneda, *The Active Side of Infinity*, 234.
- ³⁷ Barbara Myerhoff, in Mille, 342.
- ³⁸ Mille, 327-328.

³⁹ Castaneda, *The Active Side of Infinity*, 242-253.

⁴⁰ Castaneda, *The Active Side of Infinity*, 119.

⁴¹ Mille, 347.

⁴² See www.sustainedaction.org. (accessed March 2, 2009).

⁴³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, (London, Routledge, 2003), 35.

⁴⁴ Mille, 345.

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