The Two Serpents. A Short Essay on Generative Phenomenology as Comparative Mythology

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to provoke a reflection on a specific phenomenological problem: does culture shape perception and how? If we admit that it does, it seems that we should consider and study myths as a significant part of that cultural shaping. Phenomenology as an exploration of experience needs to take into account its transgenerational aspects. Aesthetic objects like mythical narrations, which transcend time without depending on technologies of image-materialisation contingent to our era, are in this sense especially important. In phenomenological analysis, myths can be brought back to two fundamental phenomena: the phenomenon of the image and the phenomenon of empathy. I will hence divide this essay into three parts: first, an introduction through pictures, second, an outline of generative phenomenology as aesthetic phenomenology, and finally, a comparison of the Greek myth of the Caduceus and the Mapuche myth of Treng Treng and Cai Cai Filu. From this analysis a relevant horizon for the phenomenology of the cultural shaping of perception will emerge: if the question of who we are can be translated to the question of what place we think we have in the cosmos, perhaps it is relevant to try to understand the mythical images we have of the cosmos we inhabit.

Keywords: aesthetic phenomenology; Mapuche mythology; generative phenomenology; comparative mythology; Treng Treng and Cai Cai Filu; Caduceus;

Q̀ rǫ̀ tó rin méjì o ò Spirit Children who walk in pairs! Yorùbá Orin Ìbejì, twin songs In Patton, 2023

In this article, I briefly outline, as an exercise of aesthetic phenomenology, the Greek and Mapuche myths of dual snakes, namely the Caduceus and the Treng Treng/Cai Cai filu myths —filu meaning snake in Mapuche language (Catrileo 165). This, not only to compare them but to evoke and invite through them a philosophical discussion around cultural questions such as the role of images and visuality, around our conception of life and matter and the transmission of memory and how it conveys traditions, also traditional dichotomies, as well as around concepts like mimesis and mythos, representation and narration, likeness and duality. In short: to invite a discussion around how we grasp

reality and its shadows. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to provoke a reflection on a specific phenomenological problem: does culture shape perception and how? If we admit that at least "the *style* of perceiving is always shaped by the norms and conventions we have acquired in a given milieu or sociocultural setting" (Doyon, Breyer 4), if not simply perception as such, then we must consider and study myths as a significant part of that sociocultural setting, even if social norms seem to belong to a more conventional, materially and intellectually clearer register than mythological narrations. Myths are, indeed, idealized tales that through characters and fantastic intrigues elaborate and engrave in us natural phenomena, historical events, and facts of existence, allowing, in their transformations, for a carrying of perspectives from the past through centuries. In the critical context we live in, where Eurocentrism is overcome to allow for other cultures to have equal rights to expression and to become legitimate sources of knowledge, a comparative study of Western and non-Western myths has its place.

In phenomenological analysis, myths can be studied mainly from two different viewpoints: first, from the perspective of how they present us with what they present us, the characters of the myth, for instance, and second, from the perspective of how they emerge, i.e. intersubjectively, and the significance they have in bonding the intersubjective community they emerge from. Myths, phenomenologically speaking, can thus be brought back to two fundamental phenomena: in the first perspective, to the phenomenon of the image, and in the second perspective, to the phenomenon of empathy, i.e. empathy not only with coetaneous subjects, but also with imaginary characters and with the generations that precede us. I will hence divide this brief essay into three parts: first, an introduction through images, second, an outline of generative phenomenology as a study of trans-generational phenomena in which the examination of aesthetic trans-generational phenomena such as myths is fundamental, to finally address the myths that interest us here.

1. Photographic domination, confessions of shame

Phenomenology understands myths as belonging to a set of experiences of a particular kind which do not quite *present* us with, for instance, a centaur, as perception might present us with an actual horse, but that *presentificate* or *presentiate* these and other characters, their actions, and the mythical worlds they belong to. In Husserlian analysis, these experiences of presentification are typically memory, phantasy, and image-consciousness.

For Husserl, image consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*) is a kind of presentification but it also involves a perception, where what is actually intended is not the same as what is sensuously presented. For instance,

in looking at a photograph of a person, we actually see first and foremost that person but this 'seeing' is founded on the actual perceptual seeing of the photograph (as a piece of paper with color on it). (Moran, Cohen 158)

Nonetheless, the connections between these, at first glance, clearly discernible experiences, memory, phantasy and image-consciousness, start being visible when we address cultural phenomena such as myths that are a performance of our imagination, but that elaborate on actual natural or historical events, that are an important part of collective memory, and that are productive of images that might have a material support, as photographs do, when they are written, but that can also be and are mainly only orally transmitted. To meditate this complex relations between these three kinds of presentification, and to meditate the question of not only how myths produce images, but how mythological, how myth-producing, images and pictures can be, I would like to introduce this comparative reflection on mythical images, a reflection in which I aim to hold two cultures and their meaning-making processes together, by remembering a series of pictures and the historical events they immortalised.

Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation, Paris, the turn of the century: opened on October 6, 1860 by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon III (Napoleon's nephew) and **Empress** Eugénie, the Acclimatisation Garden was destined for plants and animals brought from the European colonies to get used to France's weather conditions. While functioning as an amusement park, it was also used to keep indigenous people brought from all latitudes, exhibiting them in precarious conditions, and advertising them in the same way exotic plants and animals were, as a spectacle, as curiosities, as natural objects to be studied and entertained by.



Jardin zoologique d'Acclimatation, Peaux Rouges [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JARDIN_ZOOLOGIQUE_D%27ACCLIMATA TION_PEAUX_ROUGES_CHEMIN_DE_FER_DE_L%27OUEST_STATION_DE_LA_P ORTE_MAILLOT,_AFF2473.jpg#filelinks] by Bettels, Ch., 1884-1886. Public Domain.

Nowadays, the *Jardin*'s website explicitly raises the question of how unethical these "controversial ethnographic exhibitions" were, referring to the "trend towards alleged racial hierarchisation that was affecting European countries at the time".

Under a pseudo-scientific pretext, so-called "savages", mainly from Africa, but also from the Americas, Oceania and the Far North, were exhibited [...]. These "human attractions" were so successful and lucrative that they multiplied until 1931, riding the wave of colonial expansion and taking advantage of the craze for exoticism. In all, the Jardin organised around thirty "ethnographic shows" [...] of Achantis, Nubians, Indians, Lapps, Kanaks, Fuegians and Kalmyks, some of whom fell victim to the cold or disease in a capital where they suffered from the temperatures and germs. Despite being denounced by a few anthropologists, these exhibitions helped to shape the French population's prejudices towards colonised peoples, in the comfort of a blind "good conscience". (*Jardin d'Acclimatation* Home Page)

In this context, eleven Fuegians were exhibited in 1881 and fourteen Mapuche in 1883. These exhibitions and what these two groups of people from the south of Chile lived have recently resurfaced in the book *Human Zoos*, where authors Christian Báez and Peter Mason compile and contextualize the *body of pictures* (Báez, Mason 13) constituted by the photographic record of the exhibits. These images are part of the visual collection of the *Société de Géographie*, currently held at the BnF, National Library of France, a collection that contains among other items the *Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation* — Zoologic Acclimatisation Garden— archive. From this archive, consisting of two albums with 298 photographs that belonged to the prince Roland Napoléon Bonaparte, the authors publish pictures number 86 to 117, and 196 to 215 (Báez, Mason 14), portraying Fuegians and Mapuche respectively.



Mapuche people in the Paris Anthropozoological exhibition of 1883 (Báez, Mason 84)

It is important to highlight that this historical work is not done by the authors as a merely local revendication. Rather, they intend their work to be a reflection on colonisation and domination in general, specifically on one of the necessary tasks all forms of domination need to accomplish to some degree, the tasks colonisation has been most successful at: dehumanisation. How different forms of domination are recorded and mediated not only by photography but by images in general and how ordinary these visual distancing and alienating practices are still today, these are the two questions that this publication allows us to reflect upon:

Images in Spite of All". This is how the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman has characterised the four photographs recovered from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp [...]. The photographs we present in this book are also images "in Spite of All": of the violent acts, of the kidnappings, of the illnesses, of the deaths. Is a body of pictures that cements —also in a fragmentary and fleeting way— the reality experienced by indigenous subjects in the European human Zoos [...]. But these photographs are not proof of an extinct phenomenon. Even if it seems hard to believe, in the 21st century we witness the phenomenon of virtual human Zoos through media [...]. The difference with the photos of this book is that while human subjects of the past were exhibited side by side with animals in cages [...], in Guantanamo, men are the locked-up ones. And what's worst, is that North Americans had already practised this form of 'show' in 1945,

when they detained sixty-year-old poet Ezra Pound in a specially reinforced cage under the burning Italian sun¹. (Báez, Mason 13)

As Susan Sontag described in her essay on photography, "through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information [...]. Reality as such is redefined —as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance" (Sontag 121-122), but the role photography has played in the structuring of our societies as surveillance societies, in the logical continuation of colonial societies, is not exclusive to this form of visual recording. Other image forms, televisual, virtual, play an analogous role in the identification, objectivation and dehumanisation of subjects, and we can expect them to keep working towards the extremisation of this societal model, of our culture of control.

Coming back to our initial question, *viz*. 'Does culture determine perception and how?', one could wonder: if images, like these photographs, play an important role in dehumanisation, in cultural submission or domination, could mythical images risk the same? Perhaps not distancing us from the represented subjects, thus submitting them to us as photographs might do, but, for example, carrying ancient forms of relating to each other or carrying ancient dichotomies (as the Caduceus myth does in our upcoming analysis) that might reproduce a culture of domination and control? Leaving this question unanswered, let us continue analysing this particular form of image: the mythical image.

2. Phenomenological Aesthetics and its privileged access to generativity

In turning to look, I see the photograph of a young woman and I almost always see it as a representation or "image" of that young woman. As Wittgenstein observes, "We regard the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the object itself (the man, landscape, and so on) depicted there". Looking at images in this way, we tend to look through them. It is as if we see through the image's pictorial surface to gaze at what lies beyond it, both physically and metaphorically.

(Erika Goble 60-61)

The phenomenological study of art and aesthetic experience, from Mikel Louis Dufrenne to Paul Crowther, in an ocular-centric culture like ours,

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¹ Translated by the paper's author, Erika Natalia Molina Garcia.

understandably focuses on images. "Ocularcentrism —the prioritization of the visual over other senses— has its roots in the Western philosophical tradition" (Dickel 95), and its criticism has become a pivotal point and a trait of contemporary philosophy, sensorial history, and cultural studies. Nonetheless, here I would like us to still focus on images, specifically mythical images as those that are not reliant on technology, not even on writing technologies, to spread and keep acting as cultural bonds and joins. The phenomenology of images highlights our ability to re-present in a very strong sense: i.e. not as our ability to construct a mere reproduction, imitation or copy of reality through different materialities, but as our ability to live reality through and in images.

In this perspective, the living body and its perception as it is lived in the present moment will retain the status of —to put into terms that are not quite phenomenological but rather colloquial— uttermost real reality. Still, phenomenology allows us to grasp how real imaginary experiences are: not absolutely, but much more than we usually give them credit for. These early phenomenological intuitions echo a common belief of our time that finds grounds in mirror neuron theories and studies: namely, that our consciousness does not radically distinguish between real and imaginary experiences. As Husserl noticed, when we walk through a mythical scene, when we see the events narrated by a mythical tale, we do not mean ourselves to be there, yet we can 'see' the scene, we can feel it almost as if we were there -but even better, in a certain sense: for we can see it as if we were anyone, any other person imagining it or any one of the characters of the tale (Husserl 531). We experience forms of "quasi-seeing", of quasi-feeling, i.e. empathetic sensorial forms that allow us to understand the tale and share this understanding not only with other people who hear or read it in the present, in our current time, but through generations.

This is the power of myths: they create a trans-generational cultural structure that we can study through aesthetic phenomenology, i.e. the experiencing phenomenology aesthetic and presentification of (Vergegenwärtigung) that deploys not only as a study of visual experiences, not even only as examination of complex sensorial pictorial, musical, literary or narrative experiences, but as a study of complex sensorial and affective internal experiences that are elicited by mythical imagination but conform a rather formless form of experience: the experience of the self as any and all possible alter-subjects. This form of experience, this empathetic understanding not of any particular other but rather of any other with its conceivable particularities differs from a simple universalisation for it is no generalisation and it does not erase differences. It considers somatically and culturally instantiated experience in all its possible and probable variabilities, referring in that manner to what in phenomenology is called generativity, i.e. "both the process of becoming and a process that occurs over the *generations* —hence specifically the process of *historical* and social movement" (Steinbock 55). In this manner, we are able to constitute an understanding of very distant subjects that nonetheless feel to us as a part of us, of our culture, a grain of sand in the moving seabed that precedes, conditions and welcomes the present.

Husserl refers to the phenomenology that deals with these matters as 'generative'. In order for a tradition to be maintained it must be renewed, or regenerated. There must be a return to memorials, holidays [...] perhaps, recitations of prayers, and the traditional teaching of fairy tales, myths, and legends associated with cultural forebears. This does not mean that the 'generativity' of the tradition must be fixed. It is constantly revised, but it cannot proceed without repetition. A core of stories, commemorations, holidays, recited political and religious creeds, and so on, need to be in place. They amount to a generative matrix that sustains and renews a tradition. (Hadreas 74)

How can we, from this perspective, understand the hybridisation of cultures? How do we constitute and embrace all our historical and mythical ancestries when we are part of two or more traditions, when we empathise not only 'externally' with them —so to speak, for empathy is always a profound inner experience—, as one might do with any other tale, but in the mode of *this belongs to me*, *I belong to these cultures*? Here is not possible to investigate this question further. I will content myself simply with a final interpretative exploration of two generative images: the Greek and Mapuche myths of the double serpents.

3. The two serpents: the edge, the passage

With this phenomenological perspective and the possibility it gives us to start to think about subjective constitution in the context of a multiplicity of generative traditions, the myths of the two serpents can be considered from a certain impartiality, as tales and symbols that have an equal weight and value. This impartiality is relevant not only for the self-understanding of the descendants of the colonised Mapuche territories but also for the study of these mythologies in general. The first myth of the two serpents I would like to reflect upon is the Greek myth of the *Caduceus*, etymologically a Latin derivation from the word $\kappa \eta \rho \nu \xi$ meaning messenger, herald (Beekes, Van Beek 690). The Caduceus is the rod carried by Hermes, the messenger of Olympus, known as Mercury in the Roman tradition. It has two snakes curled around it. In some representations around the whole rod, in others only at its upper extremity, sometimes assorted with wings; although always with two snakes facing each other.



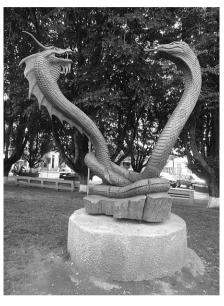
The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Mercury" The New York Public Library Digital Collections [https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e4-1a0c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99] by Fouché, P., 1884. Public Domain.

In The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology, Robin Hard outlines the Caduceus tale as follows: after asking Hermes to swear he would never steal from him again, Apollo forgives the trickster messenger and gives him a three-branched golden baton which can be the Caduceus Hermes carries in its portrayals (Hard 173). In his essay Transgressive and Sovereign Authority in the Valois Court, Touba Ghadessi links the Caduceus to a monarchic Sceptre, therefore linking it to the dominating character of Hermes, a harsh ruling this mythical figure would represent. While T. A. Cavanaugh highlights among different interpretations that a rod was a common accessory of messengers and people moving through great distances, and that the snakes would have curled on it when Hermes, while on mission for the Gods, saw two of them either fighting or copulating and tried to separate them using his rod, to which they got attached. The Caduceus seems to be, therefore, not only a symbol of physical support and protection in the divine messenger's travels but also a symbol of authority, power, and domination. Domination over animals and all that snakes symbolize in Greek mythology: over sex, passion, and bestiality, maybe over life as such, if we consider that desire is the most primary aspect of animal life. The rod in the Caduceus is, indeed, a phallic object that imposes order over the chaos snakes represent.

As Typhon's story shows, the serpent is the depiction of a powerful primitive force defined by its anarchical nature. Typhon, a giant serpent with a hundred heads and surrounded by smaller snakes, fights against Zeus for the rule of the cosmos. Typhon is a purely chaotic force, one of the most powerful

evil figures of Greek mythology and shows how the animal forces represented even in a little snake risk overpowering the order and rationality symbolised by the Gods and Zeus in particular (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 872). In summary, the Caduceus, having two snakes around it that face each other, seems to represent not only what Hermes embodies in general, messages and exchanges, communications, retributions and therefore balance between the Heavens, Earth and Hades (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 499), but also a more general and precarious cosmic balance: order and chaos, life and death, and the passage but also the fight between the two —Hermes being also who conducts the dead to the Underworld.

On the other hand, the myth of Treng-Treng and Cai-Cai filu, filu meaning serpent, filament or thread, in odd phonetic resemblance to the Latin filum, also meaning thread, and the Greek $\varphi \tilde{\nu} \lambda o v$ meaning kind and referring to a lineage of the living; this myth refers much more clearly than the Caduceus conflict between mvth a antagonistic powers of the cosmos. These are conceived as two giant snakes that are identified with water and earth, in accordance with the geography of the territory the Mapuche people live in: a very long chain of mountains aligned with an equally long body of water. This whole territory is itself an edge.



Kai Kai y Txeng Txeng. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kai_Kai_y_Txeng_Txeng_JPG] by Espinoza, R., 2015. Public Domain.

The terms Treng-Treng and Kai-Kai, or Treng Treng and Cai Cai, seem to represent the scream of each snake, the noises of the earth trembling and the ocean hissing. In the myth, the first scream is Cai Cai's, that of the water snake provoking the mythical flood. Then answers the second scream from the earth, Treng Treng, and makes the mountains grow and dance out of the water. This conflict between two serpents is the Mapuche creation myth, a narrative of the primordial deluge where most of humanity drowns or is transformed into sea creatures because of the Ocean overflowing every land.

Some humans are helped by Treng Treng and survive on the mountaintops, but they resort to cannibalism, producing further cosmic disorder. When only one couple is left, a shaman goes inside the

mountain and reveals that the two must pray and sacrifice their only child by throwing him into the water to appease the divine anger. The couple perform the sacrifice, the water is frozen inside the mountain, and order is restored in the world. (Bacigalupo 63)

Ana Mariella Bacigalupo shows how this myth is still believed today by some; believed not only to have happened but to be continuously happening. According to this author, the primordial conflict between the earth serpent, associated with the East, the Andes, and life, and the water serpent, associated with the West, the Pacific Ocean, and death, is each time relived in a cyclical time. The two serpents would take different forms and incarnate in humans throughout history. Cai Cai would become, for example, the German settler who destroys the cosmos, while the good earth serpent would become *the machi*, the Mapuche shaman, who saves and reorders the world through rituals or *nguillatuns*. Hence, the mythical flood, so common in many cultures (*Cf.* Frazer 1916), in Mapuche mythology is not a single deluge but a recurrent destruction of cosmic structures. Destruction would therefore be iterative in this cosmology, and even Treng Treng, the good earth serpent, can try to destroy humans through earthquakes when deals between nature and humans have not been respected.

4. Conclusive remarks

The myths of the two serpents in Greek and Mapuche mythology are exemplary, paradigmatic: they fulfil one of the crucial roles myths have in the trans-generational constitution of culture, carrying the same message.

[...] myths are a constant reminder that grandiose events took place on Earth and that this "glorious past" is partly recoverable. The imitation of paradigmatic acts also has a positive aspect: the rite forces man to transcend his limitations, obliges him to take his place with the Gods and the mythical Heroes so that he can perform their deeds. Directly or indirectly, myth "elevates" man. (Eliade 145)

While the Mapuche serpents seem to talk more clearly about the powers and shapes of nature, the Caduceus seems to talk more about transgression, evoking death and sex (interrupted), animality and anthropomorphic divinities, not only nature as landscape, territory, and geography, nor only the communication, intertwining, and the comings and goings between life and death. The Mapuche myth refers thus to nature in a much larger sense, not to nature as something domesticated, available, or disposable, not as anything intricated with or caring for humans as such or for each one of them, but rather to nature as continuous discontinuity, as cyclical chaos and incommensurable,

indifferent, cosmic power. This power is visible in the geographical shapes and transformations of the Mapuche world: of the snake of the horizon and the ocean, the snakes of rivers, the snake of the Cordillera, and in this sense of the frontiers, the lines, the edges and limits of their world.

Yet, if we consider Typhon's myth and the serpents in the Caduceus' myth as symbolising chaos as such, not only bestiality, we can see that both myths represent the battle between opposed cosmic forces: the fight between order and destruction. Even if this fight can be interpreted as happening *in* humans, as an internal battle for balance and betterment (Jung 6), these myths seem to talk, rather as Eliade indicates, of our place in a larger cosmological reality, one that does not need humans to arrange itself but that welcomes them and their agency as long as they learn and follow the cosmic and chaotic logics of nature. In this sense, it is relevant to consider that the serpents are two and not one nor many, for this represents the cosmologically original opposition of forces, the opposition of the same and the other. And number is not the only detail interpretation should consider.

As pointed out by Patton, "Like all pairs of totemic animals who belong to gods —horses, birds, lions, serpents— directionality matters deeply to interpretation" (Patton 44): What is the directionality of the Caduceus and the Mapuche serpents' myth? The Caduceus shows serpents that belong to a God, serpents that are, nonetheless, erected, thus not clearly subdued nor crawling. But this is maybe a greater sign of submission for they follow whatever shape and direction the rod gives them. Cai Cai and Treng Treng are, on the other hand, autonomous, absolute: horizontal moving forces, the horizons themselves, aquatic or solid, dancing, fighting, trying to find a delicate and always short-living stability, and this with no structure to follow. If from the human perspective, these serpents symbolise moral dichotomies like good and evil, solid grounds and volatility, they talk about much more than human life and death. These serpents talk about how anarchic our conceptions of the cosmos are. From the transcultural commonality one might find in the two serpents' mythologies, it seems that a cultural difference as significant as the degree of anarchy of our conception of the cosmos might emerge from the comparative analysis of these myths. Such cultural differences are those that a trans-generational phenomenology of mythical images could investigate, and maybe the results of such research could prove relevant for the understanding of how culture shapes perception in general and even self-perception. In other words, if the question of who we are can be translated to the question of what place we think we have in the cosmos, perhaps it is relevant to try to understand in this fashion what cosmos we think we inhabit.

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