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The Novelty of the New World: The Challenge of Describing the Marvel of the Americas

Las novedades del Nuevo Mundo: El desafío de describir las maravillas de América

A novidade do Novo Mundo: O desafio de descrever as maravilhas das Américas

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The Discovery of America revealed the main characteristics of the forms of acquisition of knowledge and description that prevailed in the world until the Sixteenth Century. It revealed also the difficulties and weaknesses of the traditional epistemological model when Europeans approached the novelties of the New World. For this reason the first literary and visual descriptions of the Americas and their people are charged with the necessity of getting insert into a world that became known from “a priori” categories.

Key words:

Era of Discoveries; Description of the Americas; New World, Chronicles of Discovery; Image of the Americas

El descubrimiento de América evidenció las características de las formas de adquisición de conocimiento y descripción del mundo vigentes hasta el siglo XVI, al tiempo que desplegó las dificultades y debilidades de ese modelo epistemológico tradicional frente a la novedad del Nuevo Mundo. Por esta razón es que las primeras descripciones literarias y visuales de América y sus habitantes están cargadas de la necesidad de insertarse en el mundo conocido a partir de ciertas categorías “a priori”.

Palabras clave:

Época de descubrimientos; Descripción de América; Nuevo Mundo; Crónicas de descubrimiento; Imagen de América

O descobrimento da América deixou em evidência as características das formas de aquisição de conhecimento e descrição do mundo em vigor até meados do século XVI, ao mesmo tempo em que expôs as dificuldades e fraquezas desse modelo epistemológico tradicional face à novidade do Novo Mundo. É por essa razão que as primeiras descrições literárias e visuais da América e seus habitantes estão carregadas com a necessidade de inserir-se no mundo conhecido a partir de certas categorias “a priori”.

Palavras-chave:

Época de descobrimientos; Descrição da América; Novo Mundo; Crônicas do descobrimento; Imagem da América

Introduction

When we establish a considered classification, when we say that a cat and a dog resemble each other less than two greyhounds do, even if both are tame or embalmed, even if both are frenzied, even if both have just broken the water pitcher, what is the ground on which we are able to establish the validity of this classification with complete certainty? On what 'table,' according to what grid of identities, similarities, analogies, have we become accustomed to sort out so many different and similar things? What is this coherence—which, as is immediately apparent, is neither determined by an *a priori* and necessary concatenation, nor imposed on us by immediately perceptible contents?¹

In his book *The Order of Things*, Foucault offers some very intriguing reflections that, I believe, may help to begin to explain a most complex phenomenon: that of describing the world. From this quote, we can quite clearly infer the cultural nature of the exercise of comprehending the reality before us in order to be able to describe it in words and images that give it meaning.

After reading and reviewing the European chronicles and visual images that describe the New World, I found it necessary to put myself in the place of all those men and women who, when they first came to these lands, laid eyes on a landscape that was beyond anything they had ever dreamt of, a whole world that very few of their familiar visual references could come close to describing.

Practicing the empathy that French historian Henri Marrou recommends in the exercise of the historian's craft, I can imagine how difficult it must have been to share, through the description of the new, all the wealth of this new continent that had suddenly materialized before the eyes of the Europeans. When we are able to empathize with these men who crossed the Atlantic and found themselves on lands that they had never dreamed of, we can begin to seek out the specific contextual framework that can help us to understand the words with which they recorded their impressions.

With regard to this first group, it is once again Foucault who gives us some hints as to how we may understand the way in which knowledge was acquired in the 15th and 16th centuries, a period that predates what he designates to be the start of the modern age, in the 17th century. It is what he calls the search for epistemological fields that characterize different eras and men. This epistemological field contains the elemental codes of a given culture—those codes that govern a culture's language, its perceptive frameworks, its changes, its methods, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—and these codes are what establish, for each and every man within that culture, the empirical imperatives with which he is involved and within which he may recognize his own belonging.

The approach that is suggested herein is one that attempts to discern the '*a prioris*' of that culture, because they are the elements that will determine everything else.

Describing the World at the Age of Discovery

Among the most important basic postulates accepted in the era of the 15th and 16th centuries is the notion of knowledge within a closed system in which everything is connected to everything, either by attraction or repulsion, sympathy or antipathy, contiguity or separation, or rather similitude or difference. In the end, everything is interconnected. The earth resounds in the heavens, faces are reflected in the stars and painting imitates space. The similarities propose proximities that, in turn, reinforce the sense of similitude. It is for this reason that people believed the sun engendered metals where its rays fell with greater force, or that there were as many fish in the water as there were birds in the sky.

This was a pre-established world in which relationships were there for man to seek out, understand them and embody them through shared language and symbols. To know the world was to recognize it, to situate the new within the traditional framework that was already known. In this context, the act of describing meant placing all new things in the great framework of the world. This great framework had been formulated from the “same” to understand its “sameness” and so that the “other” might enter the realm of the “same”.

This framework was erected by the authority of texts. As Anthony Grafton points out in his fascinating book *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*², medieval culture in the West was a text-oriented culture in which the assertions of the classics and the Bible gave people the fundamental tools needed to understand the world and its history. It was in this vast context that the “discovery” of America challenged people to assimilate an entirely new continent, a new landscape with new flora and fauna, but most importantly a new kind of humanity. It is this important challenge and the European difficulty to face it with its own tools what pushes us to the statement that more than a discovery of a new world, what the European experienced was a process of discovery of America.

One of the first exercises undertaken by the explorers of the 16th century, in their efforts to confront this radical newness, was the search for similarities and differences. In the case of our protagonists, the decision to focus on the similarities and/or differences between what was known and what was expected is, as we will see, a way of finding that place in the world that fit within the known framework. This was a common practice but, as we will see, the intent, the vocabulary and the referents will vary depending on the author of the description. Columbus, for example, had to make sure that his description somehow evoked an image that was as similar as possible to the Europeans’ image of the Asian world. After all, that was the reason he had been able to secure the financing for his undertaking in the first place: to reach the Orient. Because of this, he found himself somewhat forced to view everything through an Asian lens. Other explorers who were less beholden to such obligations were more interested in showing the great differences between everything they saw and everything they had previously known, whether European or Asian. Because of this, we find ourselves with quite a broad array of descriptions that constitute a treasure trove of documentary material that speaks as much about the subject carrying out the description as the objects described. In the end, it is all a matter of perspective, nobody has the last word.

Rather than reproducing the object, the image recreates it, creates it anew in a new image that is not the initial object that inspired it. The words that describe a given reality, just like the visual images that illustrate those words, are not that reality, and we would be well-advised to avoid that particular confusion. It is in the difficulty of description that we witness the emergence of signs and symbols, elements that the interlocutor might understand more easily and which, as such, become tools for approaching what is being represented. The words that Italo Calvino employs for the imaginary conversation between Marco Polo and the Great Kublai Khan are among the most eloquent examples of this practice to be found in contemporary literature.

Returning from the missions on which Kublai sent him, the ingenious foreigner improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret: one city was depicted by the leap of a fish escaping the cormorant's beak to fall into a net; another city by a naked man running through fire unscorched; a third by a skull, its teeth green with mould, clenching a round, white pearl. The Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain; he never knew whether Marco wished to enact an adventure that had befallen him on his journey, an exploit of the city's founder, the prophecy of an astrologer, a rebus or a charade to indicate a name. But, obscure or obvious as it might be, everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused. (Translated from the Italian by William Weaver)³.

This quote is rich in meaning, for it shows and underscores the need to create new language, nomenclatures and images when we have to describe something we have never seen before. Even so, the description inevitably only recounts, in a most fragmentary manner, one part of that reality—the reality that the describer has chosen to talk about, in the specific way he has chosen to describe it. And when he decides to use images, those images become immobilized as emblems, embedded forever in an individual and collective memory that will only be satisfied when, upon pondering that reality, it recognizes what it has seen before through these initial images.

When Christopher Columbus first laid eyes on this continent, which he believed was Asia, his imagination was already imbued with a number of preconceived notions regarding what he was expected to discover in the Orient. Columbus had read the classics, he had read religious literature and travel writing about the Orient, he had immersed himself in Oriental imagery and was the inheritor of a tradition that had hoped to find all the great wonders of creation, as well as wealth and all sorts of marvels in those faraway lands. It was with this baggage that Columbus approached his exploits and their consummation. He did not wish to accept that these lands were a new world, and in fact his descriptions confirm this, making constant reference to his readings and their imaginary corpus. His descriptions do not describe the real America. They describe the America that resembles his notion of the Orient. In this context, both the American man and the American landscape are described through the Columbian filter of those aspects that jibe with his preconceived idea. And he eliminates all those things that do not function as Oriental. To describe the landscape, for example, he carries out the inter-textual and visual exercise of referring to images of earthly paradise, a very established tradition in Western literature and art. Supposedly

located somewhere in the Orient, it was possible to suggest that the mythical garden was located in America, with its naturally lush vegetation, perennial green, and favorable air and climate.

Despite his preconceived notions, the panorama that Columbus confronted was so remarkably different from anything he had ever seen before in Europe, that he could not help but leave record of how hard it was to render an accurate description of what he saw. "No one who had not seen it would believe it"⁴ was his observation of the alterity of these lands. Kirkpatrick Sale is most emphatically underwhelmed by Columbus's inability to describe all that he saw, finding it inconceivable that he spoke so very little of the spectacular landscape that lay before him⁵. In the middle of a tropical rain forest, the likes of which he had never seen before in Europe, with colossal trees and many varieties of new species, he said nothing. On the first day of his encounter with these lands, Columbus devoted not one single sentence to the physical landscape.

The scant attention Columbus paid to the natural world of the Americas, coupled by his lack of vocabulary for describing the newness of this New World landscape, seems almost to turn the natural landscape into a kind of backdrop against which the savage Indians confronted the European explorers who had come to "civilize" them. According to John Elliott, the lack of importance ascribed to the natural world in the earliest European descriptions of the New World may be explained, precisely, by the Europeans' lack of interest in their own natural surroundings. This indifference toward the landscape would naturally be reflected in the lack of precise vocabulary to describe it. However, while Elliott's observation is interesting it is nonetheless worthwhile to note that the earliest European representations of singular natural elements of American flora and fauna are in fact more realistic and less laden with fantasy than their depictions of the Indians, which were done earlier. This is logical because insofar as the depiction of the Indian because the European was more involved in the process of determining his identity, and as such it would take the European more time to achieve accuracy and verisimilitude in those representations.

In defense of Columbus, we may heed the words of Antonello Gerbi, who argues that, on his first day in the Americas, Columbus had more important things to focus on than nature⁶. In phenomenological terms, we might say (as would Gaston Bachelard)⁷ that in these cases of extreme bewilderment, any kind of objective description is ultimately secondary to the sensation of interior immensity that Columbus must have experienced. The individual details of the new could never articulate the essential landscape that is experienced when one confronts an utterly and entirely new world.

When Columbus finally succumbed to the charms of the American landscape and decided to leave an explicit record of this process, he continued to do so through an Asian lens. This is why his descriptions are so abundantly filled with Asian analogies. Regarding his voyage to Cuba, for example, he lingers over a description of the very fertile terrain, in which trees and plants produce fruit twice a year, just as in ancient India.

In order to leave a record of the tremendous awe and wonder he felt when he suddenly found himself in such a perennially green and abundant natural world, Columbus also relied on the comparison with what Europeans knew in order to communicate with his interlocutors and make

himself understood to them. To this end he compared what he saw to April in Andalusia, where weather is always pleasant and the atmosphere one of total lush abundance and heady perfume. Other chroniclers described things in a similar way. Hernán Cortés, for example, described the natural environment of Mexico by comparing it to his own world: "In this land there are all kinds of animal and game, similar to those of our natural world, such as stags, deer, fallow deer, wolves, foxes, partridges, pigeons, two and three different kinds of turtle doves, quail, hares, rabbits, and as such in terms of birds and animals there is no difference between this land and Europe. There are also lions and tigers"⁸. We know that these species, with these names, did not exist in America then. The explorer was, in fact, adjusting his new reality to that of the European animal species.

The Spaniard López Medel, when describing a native plant, could not help but compare it to what he was familiar with: "In the provinces of Quito, toward the north, quite separate from Quito itself, there are a number of trees that bear a certain kind of fruit that is comprised of little berries and cavities, and when they are seasoned and cured they turn black, making a kind of food that has the same flavor and, I believe, effect as cinnamon"⁹.

To continue with the theme of the descriptions of species, Fernández de Oviedo¹⁰ described the pineapple by explaining that the fruit's name was similar to that of the pine nut, and when he described its flavor, he referred to the peach and the apricot as a way of evoking the pineapple's mild flavor¹¹. To describe cacao he said that it "is like almond"¹² and the cinnamon tree was "as tall as the olive tree and its leaves like laurel"¹³. When speaking of something as novel as the tuna, he compared it to the fig, as did Girolamo Benzoni who, in addition, compared Andean potatoes to truffles, and llamas with camels¹⁴. The German Schmidel described sweet potatoes as white roots that looked and tasted like apples, and said that mandioca tasted like chestnuts¹⁵. According to Fernández de Oviedo, the puma was like a lion "both in ferociousness and might as well as in size"¹⁶.

This practice of comparing things to the familiar worked as a model in the popular travel literature of the day, as well. In the descriptions of his voyages to the Orient, Marco Polo frequently employed this technique in order to describe what was different to his eyes. His writings abound with expressions like "just like ours" or "unlike ours", which took for granted that European things were the standard by which all things were to be measured, an immutable paradigm for confronting the world and understanding it.

Rodrigo de Albornoz defined what was foreign to him in relation to all that was European, as when he compared the Higuera River to the Rhine. Others compared the Popocatepetl volcano with Mount Etna, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo declared that Cholula, from far away, resembled the city of Valladolid. Américo Vespucio compared a town with ocean-front houses to Venice¹⁷. According to Cortés, Tenochtitlán was as large as Seville and Córdoba, its main pyramid taller than the tower of the main church in Seville and its central square larger than that of Salamanca. Ulrico Schmidel described a Paraguayan river, known to the local indigenous people as Xexuy, as wide as the Danube and as deep as half a man¹⁸. Bartolomé de las Casas compared the island of Hispaniola to England: "In its entirety this island of Hispaniola seems neither smaller nor less rich or precious in comparison to England"¹⁹. Ginés de Sepúlveda claimed that the city of

Tlaxcala was comparable to the largest European city “in terms of area, buildings and number of inhabitants”²⁰.

The search for similarities with what was known sometimes reached real extremes. Hernán Cortés, for example, actually wrote to Charles V that “there is no difference between this land and Spain”²¹. This remark deserves a bit more consideration given that it reveals not only a kind of knowledge and its description but also a value judgment regarding the thing being described. When described as similar to Spain, the place in question merited acceptance because it was likened to what was normal, familiar and rational. For Antonello Gerbi, within this act of acknowledging similarity within difference there is an implicit act of conquest and subjugation²². Joaquín Yarza suggests that it might be helpful to place this attitude in perspective when he argues that likening the foreign to the familiar is not necessarily an indication of disdain for what is different and strange, and that it may simply stem from a simple acceptance of one’s own known world²³.

Not all descriptions of the Americas, however, followed the path of comparison with the known universe. Some observations were formulated on the basis of other criteria. This, for example, is the case of Columbus, who quite masterfully described the natural environment of the New World in terms of its utility. His descriptions are full of comments that refer to the use and potential of the so-called Indies. For Columbus, nature was just one more treasure, strictly subordinate to his ambitions as well as those of the Spanish crown²⁴.

Fernández de Oviedo often exhibited the same pragmatic style of Columbus when talking about the novelties he encountered:

For without a doubt I believe, as many people do, that if a prince had no patrimony other than this land, in a short time it would be so great that neither Sicily nor England could compare to it [...] Because in addition to possessing more abundant mines, with better and greater quantities of gold than has been found or discovered in any other part of the world, nature produces such quantities of cotton that if one were to cultivate it and make a living from it, it would be better and more abundant than in any other part of the world²⁵.

He continues to name other useful species: the golden shower tree and many other species that survive far better in the New World than in Europe.

Given all these examples, it seems clear that a description is always the reflection of a very particular point of view that determines its nature and character. Once again, the eloquent words of Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities* may shed some very interesting light on the idiosyncrasies of the exercise of description. Marco Polo, when describing the cities of the empire to the great Khan, cannot help think of beloved Venice all the while, both in terms of the resulting comparison, and as a sign of the great nostalgia he feels for his native land: “Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice [...] To distinguish the other cities’ qualities I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice”²⁶.

In this light, the different chronicles of the things that occurred in the Indies necessarily varied from country to country, stratum to stratum, person to person. In his descriptions of the conquest, Girolamo Benzoni accused the Spanish of being cruel and greedy. He was Italian, and in the middle of his country's dispute with Spain, he would often describe the Indians in the most benevolent light. The perspective of Bartolomé de las Casas, as a man of the church, was not the same as that of the conquistador Hernán Cortés, because their baggage and motivations for action were entirely different. And when it came to describing the natural environment, the chronicler's relationship to nature also had a considerable influence upon the description. Columbus liked to linger over the potential use of the natural landscape of the Americas, but he lacked the vocabulary required to properly manifest his own wonder and awe at the marvels of his tropical surroundings. His perspective was that of a pragmatic man who needed to justify his voyage and identify sufficient reasons for the financing of future trips.

In general terms, however, we might venture to say that the European descriptions and images of the American realm stem from two basic viewpoints: firstly, the European vision of nature is rather hostile. Unlike other cultures, the European culture during this period was not terribly fond of its environment and the landscape was a victim of the civilizing process that so motivated the European explorers²⁷. Toward the 15th century, a period that is particularly interesting, Europe's geography and natural systems underwent considerable alteration, and during this time the continent also reveled in a literary celebration of nature²⁸.

Secondly, we have the relationship of man with other cultures; in this context the European believed himself to be the master of a superior civilization, often because he considered Christianity to be the one valid religion that possessed the key to truth. In this light, we see how the descriptions of all that was not European were peppered with nuances of paternalism and condescension. As such, both the Europeans' relationship to their natural environment as well as their interactions with other cultures serve as backdrops to their descriptions.

Naming the Space and other Tools to Describe Newness

Another tool for familiarizing the foreign was that of baptizing places on the American map with place names from Europe. Christopher Columbus carried out this practice from the very start, showering the Americas with place names that were related to Spain and the dominant Christian world. The very first island he discovered was given the name San Salvador, and the other islands he encountered would be given names that paid tribute to the monarchy that had financed his journey. And so Isabela, Fernandina, Española were names that spoke, yet again, of the spirit of superiority that fuelled the Europeans' relationship to the New World. Giving European names to places that already had their own names was an act of conquest and domination that would forever alter the identity of these islands. The same thing occurred with the denomination of "Indian" for the inhabitants of these lands.

When they named different things, the Europeans took their nomenclatures and adapted

them to their new circumstances. The new reality was made to enter within the traditional framework of the known language. It is for this reason that the puma was a lion without a mane, the tiger was similar but cowardly, the buffalo was a cow with a hump and the iguana a dragon but just a little bit smaller. Lizards were small crocodiles and the *ají* a kind of watered-down pepper. The names of things represent a projection of the European mentality on the American realm²⁹.

These descriptions also opened the door to ambiguities, and also to the device of using European situations that were perceived as similar. In order to conjure up an image of the streets of the city of Tenochtitlán, Hernán Cortés said that they were so wide that they could accommodate a row of ten horses—despite the fact that at the time there were no horses in America³⁰. Cortés availed himself of a European cultural situation in order to establish a familiar standard of measurement to describe something different. A few sentences farther along, in an attempt to evoke the atmosphere and products at an Aztec market, Cortés said that “they sell chicken pies and fish empanadas”³¹, a comment that reveals his lack of vocabulary for properly describing Mexican dishes. He also described certain houses as being “like those of barbers” and certain men as “the kind of men like the ones known in Castile as *ganapanes*” among many other inaccuracies that reveal his need to understand and be understood.

Another ingredient of the New World descriptions that helps to understand the resulting images is the indiscriminate use of fantasy fused with reality. The mental world of the medieval man was comprised of both concrete, scientifically real facts as well as fantasies that were not necessarily any less real. Both dimensions enjoyed equal importance in his mental universe³². When the 15th century explorer embarked on a trip to the Orient, he was certain that he would find great riches and awe-inspiring marvels. Even when they were not provable, the explorer firmly believed in their existence.

“The principal faculty at work in the generation of European representations was not reason but imagination”³³, Stephen Greenblatt emphatically states. It is in this context that we ought to understand those details that might seem fantastic and that abound in the chronicles and descriptions of the day. What we have at work here is imagination and even more, reduction. Certainty was not what anyone was attempting or expecting from these descriptions: what they wanted was the stereotyped confirmation of a centuries-old reality that had been envisioned and shaped by the Europeans. Even Pedro Mártir, the court’s celebrated humanist who had his doubts about these thrilling tales, did not dare deny their truth—he simply argued that this was how they were recounted to him. Even Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who had a scientific and somewhat skeptical mind, could not help but turn to the world of the fantastic to describe phenomena that he found strange. In a world in which the hand of God and the devil left physical evidence in his environment, Fernández de Oviedo was nonetheless awed. He was terrified by the hurricanes of the Caribbean and treated them as part of that demonic natural world. “Without a doubt they seem to be the work of the devil”³⁴, he exclaimed with horror. He finished by remarking that in those places where “the blessed sacrament has been placed,” there never existed such calamitous natural phenomena.

This context, in which a man’s mental world was comprised of both fiction and reality, was

fertile ground for stereotypes. The image of the cannibal, for example, finds its origins in certain real elements that were somewhat dispersed throughout the American stage, but ultimately gained legitimacy through a strong, highly stereotyped image. These icons coexisted with another one, that of the good savage. This imaginary-real geography populated the space and was perpetuated over time.

To confront all these differences, the explorers also employed the device of expressing their shock. Expressing wonderment and surprise was another way of reacting to the newness, and this intellectual and emotional experience had a decisive effect on the descriptions.

Columbus himself employed the technique of very clearly recording the awe he felt, and seems to have entered a state of permanent shock and wonder as a result of the new world that had opened up before him. The fruits of these lands smelled “absolutely marvelous”; the diversity of birds was so great that it could only be termed “marvelous”; trees and fruits had the most “marvelous flavor” and the uniformly green terrain that unfolded before him was similarly “marvelous”. And so Columbus expressed the astonishment he felt when contemplating such a great variety of species, Dürer admired the riches contained in Montezuma’s treasures, Cieza de León spoke of the very admirable things to be found in the kingdom of Peru, and everything to him seemed to be of great variety and diversity. Hernán Cortés spoke of how very marvelous he found the Aztec weavings and the works with feathers, saying that without “our own eyes we would not see them nor would our intellect be able to comprehend them”³⁵.

Describing Reality through Visual Images

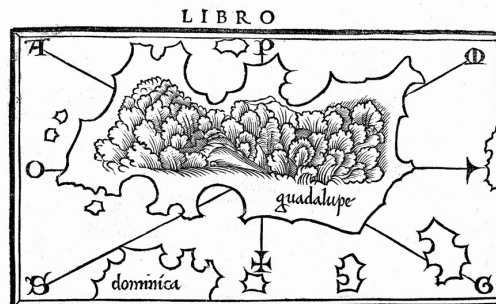
When words fell short, the explorers turned to images. According to Gombrich, they rummaged around in the vast bin of stereotypes in order to be able to illustrate that which could not be seen in person. We should remember that their editors were in Europe receiving the chronicles of the travelers and explorers who were taking notes of their adventures and descriptions, which would later have to be illustrated for the benefit of their readers. It did not matter if the story accompanying an illustration was not true. What mattered was that the visual element referred to certain categories that corresponded to a stereotyped form. The stereotype was not a carbon copy but rather something that adapted to a given function by selecting distinguishing characteristics that bore some relation to the storyteller’s reality. This was the beginning of the adapted stereotype.

There was, for example, a certain way in which islands had always been represented; the specificities of each island were irrelevant. It was irrelevant if one image was used to illustrate two islands separated by an ocean. What mattered was that the island’s insular nature was recognizable (See Figures 1 and 2).

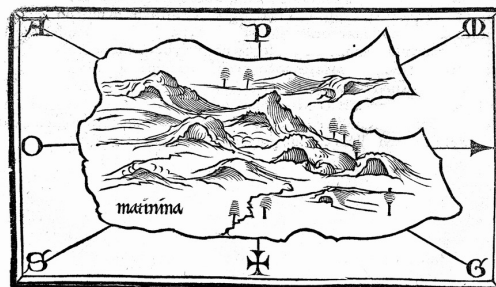
Figure 1. Map of the islands recently discovered. Italian edition of Columbus's Letter, Rome, 1493



Figure 2. Islands of the Caribbean. *Isolario*, Benedetto Bordone, Venice, 1547



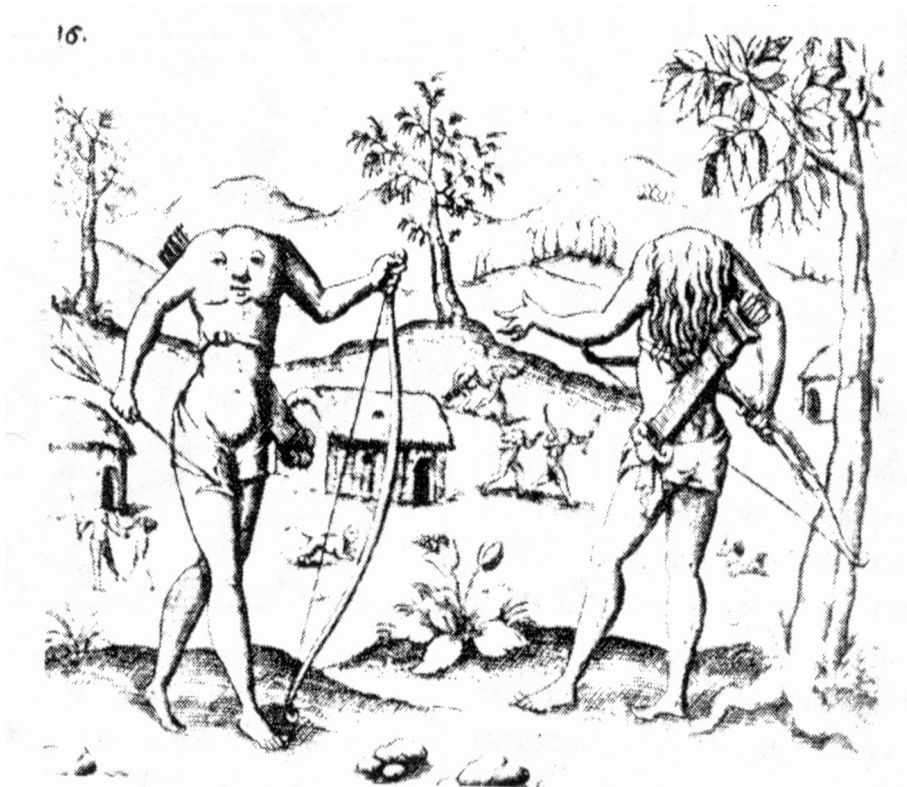
Oltra di questa seguita Characara da gli folani così nominata, lequale ha pagalli molto maggiori, che appo noi gli faciani non sono, liquali hanno tutto il corpo roscio & l'ali de diuersi colori depinte. Et è da Caniballi posseduta. Per tramontana, a questa nò molto se dilunga l'Isola Matinina, che solamente è da femine habitata, lequali à uno loro certo tempo nell'anno terminato, con gli Caniballi se cõgiogono, & poi che al tempo del parto peruenute sono, se malco lo parturiscono, passati li tre anni, à l'Isola di Caniballi lo mandano, & s'è femina, per se la tengono, & le loro habitationi sono caue sotterranee, nellequali, se alcuno huomo, fuor del tempo che e per loro terminato, con esse congiunger si uoleffe, fuggono, & dentro di quelle cauerne, con le lor faette si defendono.



Even when the artist himself had the chance to see the object being represented in person, he would nonetheless guide his hand down the road already traveled. He gazed not exclusively with his eyes, but rather through a form that had already taken root in his mind and that determined his style and composition. The familiar continued to be the starting point for describing the unfamiliar. An image cannot be composed out of nothing.

This is the case of the mythical *Blemayes*. They had appeared very early in travel literature, illustrating the narratives of legendary heroes like Alexander the Great as well as several editions of Marco Polo. *Blemayes* with their characteristic shapes became a symbol of far away otherness and as so, they will reappeared in American chronicles as sir Walter Raleigh's. In his work *Travels*, edited by Levinus Hulsius in Nuremberg by 1599, they appeared under the name *Ewaipanomas from Guyana* (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ewaipanomas from Guyana. *Travels*, sir Walter Raleigh. Edited by Levinus Hulsius, Nuremberg, 1599



A lovely illustration that takes the topic of comparison to a most explicit level is one that appears in Juan de Castellanos' work entitled *Primera parte de las elegías de varones ilustres de Indias* (First part of the elegies of illustrious men of the Indies)³⁶. It is a rather peculiar figure, and it has not been reproduced before. The piece was created after the era discussed in this essay, but it reveals a more comprehensive knowledge of the natural landscape of the Americas, which allows a more interesting comparison with the European (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Primera Parte de las Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, Juan de Castellanos, Madrid, 1589.

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The illustration that accompanies the chronicle is divided into two sections, left and right. The former represents the American realm while the latter depicts the known universe—in other words, everything that has to do with the Old World. If we read from the bottom up and from left to right we will notice a vegetable species known as maguey (American agave), facing a rabbit. Then we have a turkey, which is an animal native to the lands of North and Central America, facing a peacock, which represents the realm of the Orient. A bit further up we find a puma, a species native to the Americas that was, at first, scornfully described as a lion without a mane. The European, in this case, is symbolized by a lion with a great mane. The composition is framed by large trees representing the two worlds described within. The American realm includes a palm tree. The trees are filled with birds. The papagayo, at this point already a recognizable symbol of the Americas, faces a kind of vulture and another bird with a long neck. Above and at the center of the print we see the emperor's crest with the columns of Hercules bearing the now-legendary inscription *Plus Ultra*. Below and also in the center, a medallion features the image of St. James the Apostle. To the left, we see arrow-bearing American Indians like the ones described by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, and to the right we may admire the very civilized landscape of a medieval city. The two worlds are separated by waters traversed by ships that seem to be bringing civilization to these naked Indians. The apostle has one foot in each hemisphere, which reveals the evangelical weight of the European enterprise.

A given foundational event could be visually described and represented in very different ways. Such is the case of the Cajamarca event (See Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Francisco Pizarro and the priest Valverde at Cajamarca, Seville, 1534



Figure 6. Encounter at Cajamarca according to Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, 1615



Dating back to the 15th century, this woodcut shows father Valverde ceremoniously handing the Bible to the Inca Atahualpa. This image is tremendously valuable because it is among the few images we have that may allow us to document the European image against Andean America in the first years of the discovery and conquest. This print also has great historic value because it offers a visual record of one of the key moments of the encounter between the Spanish and the Incas—the now-celebrated episode in which Europeans presented the Incas with the Gospels, followed by the Indians' subsequent refusal to accept the Christian religion. The would have served as the excuse the Spanish needed to evangelize them and bring them “real faith”. The woodcut, moreover, also has a certain value with respect to the contemporaneity of the stories it tells: the woodcut, which dates to 1534, pretends to tell the story of something that happened in 1532.

In this image, we see the Inca sitting on a *tiana*, an object that was used for carrying royal dignitaries. The royal dignitary was the earthly representative of divinity, and as such was expected to travel in a state of repose as a symbol of his responsibility for maintaining the planetary balance. In Andean mythology, the world had been created not by “creation” but by organization. Things already existed, and the gods simply did a better job of organizing them. The god of the Christians had done his work first and then rested on the seventh day. The Andean gods first walked, and moved around destroying what previously existed, and then rested. Only once they were sitting down, in a restful state, did they give the world a new order. It is for this reason that the dignitary's rest was so important, so that the world would not be destroyed again. The *tiana* was the main emblem of his contemplation and ethical stance, and it was for this reason that Atahualpa sat as he waited for the Spanish: to show them that he was the authority, that the cosmic and social balance depended on him. The Spanish, however, saw the Inca as nothing more than a local king who refused to accept the Christian religion, and as such they did not realize the gravity of the offense represented by their attempt to impose another belief system upon them and deny the Inca's authority. “From an Andean position, Fray Vicente Valverde's attempt to convince the Inca of the existence of kings and gods that were superior to the Andean kings and gods, and the total lack of respect for Atahualpa”³⁷ were what precipitated the armed conflict that later ensued.

The illustration presented here reveals a considerable level of ethnocentrism. The Europeans are shown in their full regalia, with all their weapons, while the indigenous Andeans appear naked, which is historically incorrect. The only identifiable figure is the Inca, because he is traveling on the *tiana*, but his traditional symbols of power, such as the *mascapaycha*, the *llauta* and the *suntur paucar*, are nowhere to be found in this picture. Some years later, the Andean chronicler Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala would draw a picture of the very same scene from his point of view, which depicted the Indians dressed, the dignitary occupying the center of the composition and, in addition to his traditional *unku*, carrying the previously mentioned headdress ornaments symbolizing his power and authority.

The reflections and examples presented in this paper do not pretend to offer anything close to a complete vision of the problem regarding the acquisition of knowledge and its description. On the contrary, we have seen that we are dealing with a universal topic that can assume different characteristics according to different epistemological tools and cultural backgrounds. As

a corollary, doors are open to make similar exercises or to broaden this. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the tools and mechanisms to deal with all kinds of otherness are quite universal and recognizable. Looking for similarities and differences with the familiar, naming the other, exaggerating the difference with superlative adjectives or focusing on the possibilities of the described subject are all forms of managing differences at the encounter.

What is particular on the epoch we are dealing with is the text-oriented focus of the exercise of facing reality and describing it. In this sense, the terms of reference in which description lays, are those inherited from the Biblical message and the Classical texts. Everything that is written in those texts has the rank of authority both to understand the world and to represent it. Experience has not gained yet enough space to be the critical mean to acquire knowledge. This mean of acquiring knowledge would constitute the tools as well as the obstacles to describe the marvel of the New World. Useful at the beginning, the approach of quoting the Bible and the Classical would prove not to fit with such a different reality, one never seen by any canonical writer before.

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Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, *Las Palabras y las cosas. Una arqueología de las ciencias humanas*. Siglo veintiuno editores, Buenos Aires, 2002, p. 5.

² Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts. The power of scholarship in an age of science, 1450-1800*. Harvard University Press, England, 1992.

³ Italo Calvino, *Las Ciudades Invisibles*, Editorial Siruela, Madrid, 1994, p. 36.

⁴ Translated from Cristóbal Colón, *La Carta de Colón anunciando el descubrimiento*. Edición de Juan José Antequera Luengo, Alianza Editorial, 1992, p 46.

⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise. Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990, p 101.

⁶ Antonello Gerbi, *Nature in the New World. From Christopher Columbus to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1975, p 12.

⁷ Gastón Bachelard, *La Poética del espacio*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, segunda edición, México, 1975, p.223.

⁸ Translated from Cortés, Hernán, Primera Relación, en *Cartas de Relación*, Edición de Angel Delgado Gómez, Editorial Castalia, Madrid, 1993, p.139.

⁹ Translated from Tomás López Medel, *De los Tres elementos. Tratado sobre la naturaleza y el hombre del Nuevo Mundo*, Edición de Berta Ares Queija, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1990, p.167.

¹⁰ Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557) was a Spanish chronicler who stayed at the Western Indies for many years, after which he wrote an important literary work.

¹¹ Translated from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1950, pp. 153-154.

¹² Translated from Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid, 1855, Tomo IV, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 387.

¹⁴ Translated from Girolamo Benzoni, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1989, p. 313 and 321.

¹⁵ Translated from Ulrico Schmidel, *Relato de la conquista del río deLa Plata y del Paraguay, 1534-1554*, Alianza, Editorial, Madrid, 1986, p.44.

- ¹⁶ Translated from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid, 1852, Tomo II, p. 331.
- ¹⁷ Translated from Américo Vesputio, carta a Lorenzo de Médicis, Julio 1500, p. 61
- ¹⁸ Schmidel, *op. cit.*, p.83.
- ¹⁹ Translated from Bartolomé De Las Casas, *Apologética Historia Sumaria I*, in *Obras Completas*. Tomo 6, capítulo 20, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1992, p. 366.
- ²⁰ Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, *Historia del Nuevo Mundo*, Alianza Editorial, segunda edición, Madrid, 1996, p. 142.
- ²¹ Cortés, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- ²² Gerbi, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- ²³ These ideas were taken from a personal conversation with Art Historian Joaquín Yarza, Barcelona 2001.
- ²⁴ ... “ ni se me cansan los ojos de ver tan hermosas verduras y tan diversas de las neustras, y aún creo que en ellas muchas yervas y muchos árboles que valen mucho en España para tinturas y para medicinas de especiería”. Cristóbal Colón, *Textos y documentos completos*. Edición de Consuelo Varela, Alianza Editorial, segunda edición, Madrid, 1992, p. 120.
- ²⁵ Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias*, *op. cit.* , p. 85.
- ²⁶ Italo Calvino, *Las Ciudades Invisibles*, Editorial Siruela, Madrid, segunda edición, 1995, p. 100.
- ²⁷ Kirkpatrick Sale, *op. cit.*, p. 82
- ²⁸ Beatriz Fernández Herrero, *La utopía de la aventura americana*, Editorial Anthropos, Barcelona, 1994, p. 83.
- ²⁹ Angel Rosenblat, *La primera vision de América y otros estudios*, Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educación, Caracas, segunda edición, 1969, p. 37
- ³⁰ Hernán Cortés, *Segunda Relación*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
- ³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 236.
- ³² To get more information on the importance of fantasy in the mental world of medieval man, see Jacques Le Goff, *Lo maravilloso y lo cotidiano en el Occidente medieval*, Gedisa, Barcelona, 1996; Vladimir Acosta, *Viajeros y Maravillas*, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1992; John Friedman B., *The Monstrous races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1981; Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991; Claude Kappler, *Mosntruos, Demonios y Maravillas a fines de la Edad Media*, Ediciones Akal, Madrid, 1986.
- ³³ Stephen Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
- ³⁴ Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
- ³⁵ Hernán Cortés, *op. cit.*, p. 232.
- ³⁶ Juan de Castellanos, *Primera parte de las elegías de varones ilustres de Indias*, Madrid, En casa de la viuda de Alonso Gómez, 1589, p. 10.
- ³⁷ José Luis Martínez, “Rituales fallidos, gestos vacíos: un desencuentro entre españoles y andinos en 1532”, en *Revista del Museo Chileno de Arte precolombino*, Número 1, Santiago de Chile, 1994, p. 38.