

Antropologia Portuguesa

Volume 20/21
2003/2004

Departamento de Antropologia | Universidade de Coimbra

Recensões

Seeing and Reading *Los Viajes de Humboldt. Una Nueva Visión del Mundo*.
Patente no Antigo Colegio de San Ildefonso, Cidade de México.
26 Septiembre del 2003 a 25 de Enero del 2004.

Exhibitions are by their nature ephemeral creations, which by the time they have been reviewed in academic journals, have often already passed. Yet, because after closure they leave only diminishing traces in the reports, briefs, surveys, catalogues and reviews which tried to capture, analyse or evaluate them, it is this fleeting quality that perhaps provides the strongest compulsion for reviewing and recording them. *Los Viajes de Humboldt. Una Nueva Visión del Mundo* (San Ildefonso, Mexico D.F., 26th September 2003-25th January 2004) is a monumental achievement which offers not only the intended illustrated narrative of the life, voyages, discoveries and inventions of Humboldt, but perhaps less intentionally invites debate on the nature and effects of monographic exhibition genres more generally.

The exhibition occupies seventeen galleries in the ex-convent of San Ildefonso. Galleries one to five focus on Humboldt's childhood milieu, his early career, and the development of his scientific method; galleries six to eight describe his expeditions; gallery nine provides an interjection on his humanistic concerns; galleries ten, eleven, twelve and fourteen examine his contribution to natural history; while galleries thirteen and fifteen to seventeen are mainly devoted to his contribution to archaeology and ethnography and the legacy it stimulated.

With the exception of the second gallery, which recreates a late 18th century mine, in which the spectator is invited to enter within the structure of the exhibition, the remaining galleries are arranged thematically like a descriptive monograph which requires external inspection to achieve a cumulative appreciation of the contribution of Humboldt's work to the modern understanding of the world. This monographic presentation maps onto a three dimensional space an essentially two dimensional didactic model, superior to the book in that it presents original sketches, prints, maps, diagrams and scientific instruments, some of which, like the early electrostatic generators, can be handled, but nevertheless reducing the

role of objects to illustrations of text based narratives. Unsurprisingly, the exhibition opens with a bust of Humboldt himself, photographs of his family, prints of the Berlin of his youth to illustrate the provinciality and 'military mentality' of its citizens; the often absent father, the mother and the household Humboldt did not himself much like - he called his life 'sad' and referred to his home as the 'castle of unease'. The inclusion of illustrated botanical albums drawn by his contemporaries, however, alludes to the period of Enlightenment, and despite an otherwise dreary existence Humboldt, from the age of sixteen, became exposed to the new thought through the salon run by the medical doctor and physicist, Markus Herz. It is in the next gallery, the reconstruction of the interior of a mine, that the essence and efficacy of Humboldt's method is revealed. The method he originated was based on the prior compilation of all available knowledge on a given object, phenomenon or condition, followed by an exhaustive analysis to uncover its essence and bring to light the structure underlying it. Scientific knowledge is represented as telluric hidden deep within natural phenomenon like the earth itself, waiting to be wrestled from hidden natures, and the mine provides a metaphor of his episteme. It is no accident that the first concrete results of the use of his method led to making a series of unproductive mines workable again, better safety of the workers, the preparation of diagrams showing transversal cuts to reveal the structure of the earth itself and the provision of schools for the miner's children. To follow the telluric metaphor further, Humboldt's method made the hidden depths of the earth visible, assisted in the location of its riches, helped to domesticate its dangers, and provided riches and enlightenment for the mine owners and the children of their workers. Gallery three, then examines more deeply these contributions through a series of tools, machines, instruments and protective devices, like the air mask he invented to rescue miners, through the provision of original artefacts and models, drawings of transversal sections, and books. Humboldt's own first book on mineralogy and his discovery and classification of 56 species of plants found growing in mines and caves, which came out of his observations and experiences, are also noted. The next gallery develops the theme of experimentation; the importance of instruments to generate agencies and apply their effects to other materials to observe, record and interpolate the hidden reasons behind such actions. He tested the effect of electricity on muscles through passing it through his own body and frog legs; he observed the effects of denying oxygen to living creatures, and developed chemical means of generating electricity. Gallery five describes the application of his method to the preparation of his first expedition; the careful study of every map of America he could find in the

libraries of Berlin, Göttingen and Hamburg. Then, through the use of measuring instruments and a process of abstraction the process of carefully redrawing them to increase their accuracy and make more precise the shape of the American continent. Humboldt's beautifully drawn maps are shown next to earlier ones made by Pieter Goas (1620), Isaac Tirion (1765), Malte-Brun (1812), and others.

The next three galleries examine the voyages themselves, beginning first with the emergence of a European expeditionary culture; Humboldt's organisation of his life around his project, in which he devoted six years to preparing the expedition, five years making it and thirty years analysing and publishing its results; and the influence of his work on later scientists, notably Darwin. This section reiterates his method; compilation and analysis; observation and experimentation, analysis, deduction and synthesis, as well as suggesting the relative time that should ideally be given to field and library based research and the relation between the different mental processes associated with them. This was an important issue in the early 19th century, as part of the professionalisation and institutionalisation of science, scientists felt the need to legitimate the importance and uniqueness of their own journeys from those of ordinary travellers. The objects gathered together here, globes, scientific instruments, sextants, marine chronometers, and prints of Tenerife showing the interior of a crater and a giant tree, given their function is metonymic and connotative, are probably dispensable, though they anticipate the real purpose behind Humboldt's voyage, described in gallery seven. Humboldt requested directly permission from Charles IV to undertake his voyage, and the passport issued him, together with a portrait of the monarch and prints of Madrid at the end of the 18th century refer to his audience. Some of the forty scientific instruments he carried with him to study the effect of heat, electricity, magnetism, and lightning, measure mountains and collect botanical and zoological specimens, are described, and the route he navigated from Cuba to South America, Mexico and North America is shown through maps, his own calculations on the route and a video presentation. Yet the real significance of his activities was related to the far grander project of examining the interweaving connections between the forces of nature and the living world of plants and animals. The next gallery deals with his arrival; the establishment and organisation of his expedition; his first investigations and measurements of the Orinoco, Negro, and Magdalena rivers, and his capture, illustration and drawings of jungle animals and plants. The moment is captured in Eduard Ender's famous 1856 painting of Humboldt and his assistant, Aimé Bonpland, in their jungle hut surrounded by scientific instruments and specimens that they have wrestled from

the undifferentiated luxuriant vegetation that surrounds their door. The jungle here plays a similar heuristic function to that of the mine in gallery two; a sheer undifferentiated nature, which at first allows neither vision or exploration, but by the use of machines and instruments becomes penetrable. It can be subjected to measurement and differentiation; the animals, plants, stratigraphy and topography buried within it can be made visible, and finally it can be yielded to economic exploitation. This gallery brings together coloured lithographs of the places he visited, pages from his diary with their drawings and descriptions, and various interesting series of his sketches of butterflies, birds, insects, manatee and a crocodile, drawn by others from his sketches and detailed descriptions (the process of rendering unrecorded animal life from written description and poor sketches is a remarkable and fascinating feat of reconstruction which although focusing attention on the constitutive technologies of art, and the artworks in themselves, goes hardly remarked).

Gallery nine, devoted to Humboldt's humanism, at first appears almost as a digression, until the implications of his universal science for bettering the human condition, a position he shared with the French encyclopaedists and his support of republicanism, is recalled. Less than a digression the gallery brings together the evidence of the moral person necessary to perform the alchemy of his apotheosis towards the end of the exhibition. The frontispiece of his 1814 *Atlas Geográfico y Físico del Nuevo Continente*, depicting the figures of Minerva, goddess of wisdom and Mercury, god of trade, consoling America, represented as an Aztec warrior with downcast head, provides the central iconic object in this gallery. Its caption, "Humanity, Knowledge, Economy" succinctly unites humanism and science with economic exploitation. The gallery draws attention to the cruelty Humboldt witnessed in Venezuela where he recounted missionaries attempting to convert Indians by whipping them and in Cuba where he saw a slave market and witnessed the conditions endured by slaves on the country's sugar plantations, points out his open criticism of colonialism. The theme is illustrated by maps and prints of the places he visited; sugar plantations; a cross section showing the arrangement of slaves in a slave ship, and a copy of his 1827 *Ensayo Político*.

The next three galleries, ten, eleven and twelve, together with gallery fourteen, return to his scientific achievements in different fields; in botany, Humboldt brought 6,000 plant specimens back to Europe, 3,600 of which had been previously unknown. His friendship with José Celestino Mutis, a renowned botanist and founder of an art school in Bogotá devoted to the illustration and painting of botanical specimens, and the 1,400 illustrations Humboldt had made of part

of his collection is documented by the inclusion of botanical illustrations, prints, books, microscopes and a plant carrying case. The next gallery turns to vulcanology; his attempt in Ecuador to climb nearly every peak on the so called Avenida de los Volcanes, including Chimborazo which at 6,310 metres was considered the highest mountain in the world. The gallery includes some of the mineral specimens he collected; preserved examples of condors and vultures, but more importantly a print from an etching by Bouquet from a drawing by Shöenberger and Turpin illustrating the different altitudes at which different plants grow. The correlation between altitude and plant species is signalled as sufficient in itself to establish the new science of the geography of plants. Aspects of his ecological investigations based on his systematisation of numerous observations and measurements of altitudes allowed these correlation's to be extended as explained in gallery twelve. Gallery fourteen describes his detailed measurements of the temperature of the air and sea during his journey between Callan and Guayaquil, leading to his discovery of the current that now bears his name. These scientific successes are interrupted in gallery thirteen, by the emergence of an uncharacteristic flight of fantasy. His early interest in the Mar Parime, drawn as an enormous inland sea in Northeast South America on early maps and the site of a fabulous land of gold, led him to identify it with the much smaller Lake Guatavita, near Bogotá. Persuaded by the Muisca legend of their ancient cacique who each morning after having his body covered with gold dust, dived into the lake, Humboldt believed he had located El Dorado and, rather inexplicably for such a careful man, estimated that the lake contained gold objects worth over \$300 million; enough to encourage treasure hunters to visit the site for decades after.

The last three galleries include his archaeological and ethnographic observations beginning with his studies in the Andes on Chimu and Inca ruins, before moving on to Mexico and ending, with perhaps the poorest part of the exhibition, with his legacy to Mesoamerican studies. Gallery fifteen describes his 1802 journey to Lima and Quito where he saw "sad remains of civilisation". He drew and measured some of the best preserved Inca ruins in Ecuador, as well as making a plan of Chan Chan and drawings of Chimu and Inca pottery types. During the next two years in Mexico (Nuevo Espana) - told in gallery sixteen - he further studied antiquities, inspecting the Calendar and Tizoc stones; having the enormous statue of Coatlicue dug up from its hiding place for proper examination, and drawing stone sculptures of Chalchihuitlicue (which he mis-identified as an Aztec priest), Cinteotl and the pyramid of Cholula. In the archives he "studied hundreds of Aztec pictographic manuscripts" and in the field drew diagrams and

cross sections from throughout Mexico. Here he also returned to his mineralogical interests visiting mines in Taxco, Pachuca and Guanajuato, and criticising their poor conditions which had caused the death of thousands of Indians. This penultimate gallery consecrates Humboldt as a visionary of the new world; a Prussian scientist who brought with him revelatory methods by which to make the riches and potential of the country transparent, in opposition to the weapons and dogma the Spanish had brought before him to bring it to its knees. Naturally, the exhibition makes no mention of Cortéz, but the contrast between these two European super-heroes, the first representing the age of faith and the second, the age of the Enlightenment, cannot be ignored. Cortéz, the ruthless military genius that through cunning and subterfuge destroyed new world civilisation and brought about the collapse of its population; and Humboldt, an equally undeterred traveller, enlivened with the spirit of enquiry and righteous humanism, and committed through the establishment of diverse systems of measurement, description and the postulation of corollary relations, to the systematisation and comparative standardisation of the continent's land mass, creating a normalised space ready for domestication by its newly independent and rightful masters. The message of the exhibition is clear. Humboldt is lauded as the figure that a newly independent Mexico, odious of nearly 400 years of Spanish colonialism, wanted to supplant Cortéz as the presiding genius of the nation. Not quite the founding father, difficult because of both Cortéz's and Humboldt's foreign nationalities, but roots from which the nation could be created. The symbolism of military conquest and deliverance is substituted for the equally potent symbolism of scientific conquest and reconciliation. In Humboldt, scientific accomplishments were complemented by republican liberalism and humanism. The universalism of his science promised to break the provincial backwardness in which Spain had kept her former colonies and reintroduce them back into the currents of world history. Although, clearly, none of this is explicitly stated, the assemblage of objects; the inclusion of a large portrait of him surrounded by paintings of the valley of Mexico, and the products of his labour, numerous maps, topographical drawings, cross sections of mines, his drawings of pre-Hispanic antiquities, and a small 18th century feather picture of the Virgin of Salud brought in Patzcuaro together with the mineral specimens he once carried away to Berlin, acclaim the restoration of one of Mexico's heroic figures. If this is not enough, the inclusion in the text of a letter written by Lucas Alamán eulogising his work as singularly having shown what Mexico could be like under a good and liberal constitution, reaffirms his towering importance.

It is a pity, after Humboldt's triumphant apotheosis in the penultimate gallery that the final section on his ethnographic legacy; a subject that was to become crucial in building a national identity, ends rather limply. The great iconographic and epigraphic analyses began by Eduard Seler and the ethnographic data gathered by Theodore Preuss which provided models by which the former sought to reconstruct pre-Columbian religion and ritual, is mentioned, but the much wider science of ethnography developed by Bastian using many of Humboldt's insights, and for whom Seler and Preuss worked, is strangely missing. Even the relationship between Seler's work and that of Humboldt is not made clear and the exhibition ends apologetically with a selection of objects Preuss collected from the Huichol and Cora.

The structure of the exhibition neatly corresponds to the three moments de Certeau identifies as a fundamental structure underlying most travel narratives, and despite the format, the exhibition is primarily narrative; home, departure and separation (galleries one to five), adventure (six to fifteen), and re-incorporation (sixteen and seventeen). This tells us nothing in itself, until we examine the way the exhibition uniquely builds a structure of events and the narrative effects that they give rise to.

The exhibition stands as homage to a great man, but beyond this cult of the individual lies a complicated intermeshing of diverse narratives; narratives of adventure, exploration, and discovery, combined at the same time with emergent scientific discourses which dispassionately abstract and normalise nature by reducing it to the manifestation of a system of natural laws, derivable from set methods, and a standard descriptive nomenclature. As with his work in the mines of Saxony, Humboldt's researches, albeit apparently unintentionally, lead directly to economic geography; his observation of the effects of climate on plant life, more efficient agriculture; his recognition of the qualities of guano for increasing soil productivity, and to the rationalisation of mineral exploitation. The other face of Humboldt, as the harbinger of domesticity, left America exposed to usually foreign exploitation; more efficiently attenuated thanks to the rationalisation of its methods, than anything the old colonialism had at its disposal. This contradiction between transcendental science and the capture of its laws and methods in the employ of economic exploitation, calls for a third type of narrative to resolve it. The political, moral and humanistic depiction of Humboldt is designed to save him from charges of being a forerunner who opened-up the country by revealing its mineral riches; economic geography and rich pre-Columbian antiquities for the pillage that was to follow. Political idealism, republicanism and his staunch

anti-colonialism (gallery nine) separate him from those that came previously and after his work had been completed. If after this, his humanism could still be doubted, he himself is shown to be only too human, by the digression over into his imaginative foibles presented in gallery thirteen.

In answer to our original question, what can three dimensional projections of essentially two dimensional narrative based representations achieve over their more economic, portable, and convenient templates, we can make the following observations. First, exhibitions achieve better nuancing; the subtle pauses and diversions introduced by galleries nine and thirteen, avoid a harsher reading of the contradictions within narrative. Second, exhibitions transform the representation of their subject and its associations into epic scales, bringing visual grandeur and drama into the display and the juxtapositions of the objects that support and extend their narratives. Third, their enunciations can be highly persuasive and therefore effective both on the individual subjectivity and on the numbers of persons they reach. By means of the repetition of information in different contexts, they can obscure redundancy while achieving efficacy; Humboldt's method was a theme reiterated throughout the exhibition, but still avoided redundancy by moving between different contexts. It was further invoked by visual metaphors, the reconstructed mine working or Ender's painting of Humboldt and Aimé's jungle 'laboratory'. Fourth, the existence of an aura around original hand written diary pages, illustrations, drawings or family portraits, allows exhibitions to provide an altogether greater authenticity for the consecration of an hagiography. In the end, *Los Viajes de Humboldt* is more than an exhibition, a monument, which albeit only temporarily, commemorates Humboldt, reiterated Simón Bolívar's opinion of him as; "a great man who with his eyes pulled America out of her ignorance and with his pen painted her as beautiful as her own nature". What better subject to seal the bonds between the exhibition's sponsors – the governments of Germany and Mexico; "Humanity, Knowledge, Economy"?

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