

Envisioning the Amazon: Knowledge, Science, and Media (1863-1927)

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In this essay I am interested in the genealogy of ways of “looking at” the region of the Brazilian Amazon that are bound up with the cultural history of modernity from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the first two decades of the twentieth century. During this extended period technology, progress, and science were considered to be means through which the frontier region of the Brazilian Amazon could be incorporated into the space of the modern nation, the international networks of trade, and ultimately the temporal regime of modernity as such. Therefore, the scientific approach to nature issued into attempts to impose order on nature. These practices of knowledge prefigured or accompanied, it has been claimed, “the extractive, transformative character of modern capitalism”, and thereby presented “the picture of the planet appropriated and redeployed from a unified, European perspective” (Pratt 1992, 36). Yet, the problem with this claim is that it amounts to imposing a preconceived order of knowledge on a merely objectified realm of nature (Valereto 2018, 37).

The different media of representing the Amazon (including the practice of writing) were often not only used as documenting the technological advances of so-called “civilization”, but they were also implicated in the modernizing project itself. I want to argue that during this broader period of modernity visual and verbal representations of the Amazon register a resistance of nature that cannot be contained by technology’s mastery of nature, or by the dichotomy between savage nature and modernist progress (Stepan 2001, 238). The internal frontier of the Amazon challenges the discourse of progress itself. My basic assumption is that representations of this landscape explore changing and contradictory alliances between human and natural agents, thus exemplifying the epochal “geological” formation now routinely referred to as the Anthropocene (Andermann 2018, 192).

In the following, I will outline, by a series of disparate examples, a brief genealogy of the ways in which the Amazon has been envisioned. I have deliberately chosen the term “envisioning”, since it may connote both

actual visual experience, verbal evocations of visual experience, as well as anticipations of experience, namely those nurtured by the knowledge of prior textual and visual sources—this recursive dimension is in fact a persistent and distinctive feature of Amazonian representations (Wylie 1992). I will start with the nineteenth-century legacies of positivist science and the rhetoric of affect in the programmatic texts of Euclides da Cunha, with their idea that the Amazon poses a challenge to representation and the notion of temporal progress. In the next section, I will briefly discuss how corporate photography participated in two highly symptomatic projects of economic-technological modernization during the first decade of the twentieth century, namely the Rondon commission and the construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railway. Finally, I will turn to a parodic counter-model of visual/corporeal perception in the travel writing and photography of the modernist author Mário de Andrade, resulting from his Amazonian voyage in 1927.

Euclides da Cunha: Nature, Order, Marvel

A good starting point for the visual apprehension of the Amazon, as well as the alliance of scientific authority and the paradigm of vision in the nineteenth century is the travel report *The Naturalist on the River Amazon* (1863), by the Victorian naturalist Henry Walter Bates (1852-1892). Toward the beginning of the narrative Bates presents the idea of a total vision as attained through an optical instrument:

[...] westward, stretching towards the mouth of the river, we could see through the captain's glass a long line of forest, rising apparently out of the water; a densely packed mass of tall trees, broken into groups, and finally into single trees, as it dwindled away in the distance. This was the frontier, in this direction, of the great primaeval forest, characteristic of this region, which contains so many wonders in its recesses, and clothes the whole surface of the country for two thousand miles from this point to the foot of the Andes (Bates 2009 [1863], 11).

More than with sweeping visions of landscape, Bates' popular travel book is precisely intent on these "recesses", and thus many of its pages are filled with fascinating, minute descriptions of plant and animal life, especially insects and butterflies.

Developing further Bates' notion of the "frontier", the collected essays written by the Brazilian author Euclides da Cunha (*À margem da história,*

1909; *Land without History*) originated as part of the *Comissão Brasileira de Reconhecimento do Alto Purús* (1904-1905), which was concerned with the drawing of boundaries between Brazil and Peru, and in which Cunha had assumed a leading position. Therefore, it is no surprise that his writerly habit was intensely concerned with a “mapping” impulse—in this respect his writings can be said to be a foundational moment for the subsequent discursive framing of the Amazon. In Cunha’s writings the Amazon is represented as a region that is located outside the sphere of modern history as well as of time itself, and where the observing “national” subject “feels dislocated in space and in time; not outside his country but nonetheless estranged from human culture, lost in the hidden recesses of the forest and an obscure corner of history” (Cunha 2006, 32). Where for Bates the “recesses” of the natural landscape contained marvels, for Cunha they constitute a hindrance to the task of mapping. Cunha’s texts on the Amazon (much like his literary masterwork, *Os sertões*) may therefore be seen as paradigmatic for “the disjunctive experience of colonial time”, or the “tragic collusion of different temporalities” (Helgesson 2014, 265; Foot Hardman 2001, 53).¹ They struggle with the question of how the frontier region of the Amazon may be brought within the sphere of modernity and the modern nation, even as the specificity of Amazonian nature is said to constitute a major cognitive obstacle.

For Cunha, the Amazon represents a rift between man and nature, nation and landscape. Writing from his multiple positions as an engineer, journalist, and a member of the Brazilian academy, he characterizes the Amazon as a paradoxical space in need of modern exploration, but also as constitutionally resistant to attempts at scientific ordering: “It contains everything and at the same time lacks everything, because it lacks that linking-together of phenomena developed within a rigorous process that produces the well-defined truths of art and science” (Cunha 2006, 5). Remarkably, in Cunha’s view the unruly, disordered nature of the Amazon is in fact echoed by the disordered (existing) body of scientific work about this region:

Despite its abundance, the scientific literature on the Amazon reflects the physical geography of Amazonia: it is amazing, highly unusual and exceedingly

1 For the connection between travel writing and temporality generally: Henrikson and Kullberg (2020).

disjointed. Any who dare study it carefully will, at the end of that attempt, get but a small way past the threshold to a marvelous world” (Cunha 2006, 5).

The passage exemplifies how the perception of Amazonia is constantly informed by the reading of prior textual sources and representations. Even as the positivist intellectual Cunha appears to speak here for the need of scientific progress that advances “past” the various “specializations” of Bates and other “brilliant monograph writers” (Cunha 2006, 5), what is envisioned at the horizon is not an utopia of order, but a “marvelous world”. The category of the marvelous, a central trope in the rhetoric of new World discovery since the sixteenth century, is not assigned by Cunha to a bygone era of exploration. Rather, it continues to affect the scientific writing of his own day:

They [the writings of the early chroniclers, JW] are replicated today in the most imaginative of scientific hypotheses. The imagination can become hyper-developed when acting on a discordance in the land itself. Even the most ordered of minds can become unbalanced on inquiring into such grandeur (Cunha 2006, 6).

Thus, even the Canadian geologist Charles Frederic Hartt (1840-1878) is said to have abandoned his customary sobriety: “The great river, despite its sovereign monotony, evoking the marvelous so powerfully that it catches up the unassuming chronicler, the romantic adventurer, and the careful scholar alike” (Cunha 2006, 5-6). Even as Cunha seemingly seeks to profile his own discursive authority with regard to the previous, numerous written sources, there is also a sense that the natural marvelous is simply a given—and that it indeed powerfully affects Cunha himself.

This is the reason why Cunha’s texts are so rich in contradictory expressions: they appear to call for a more complete, stable, systematic ordering of nature, and yet passages as the one quoted above repeatedly collapse the separation between observer and observed. Moreover, they also point to the limits of a purely objective approach – which is borne out, of course, by the stylistic and rhetorical hybridity of his own scientific/literary discourse. In another essay of the collection, entitled “This Accursed Climate”, Cunha depicts the phenomenological experience of how an exile/traveler enters and moves up the course of the great river:

He goes into the Amazon. He takes heart for a moment upon meeting the singular physiognomy of the land. But then comes the low-lying immensity—where his gaze is exhausted by the very scene he is contemplating, enormous

to be sure but contentless, reduced to the vague frame provided by distant banks [...]. And the days pass without definition before the strange motionlessness of a picture done in one single color, one single height, and one single model, to which is added the dread sensation that life has simply stopped. Every impression is inert, the concept of time is abolished, for the succession of uniform external phenomena does not disclose it (Cunha 2006, 31-32).

I quoted this passage at length because it shows that for Cunha the Amazon is not simply a “land without history”, but that it only appears as such for the experience of an individual spectator, who, in contrast to cultivated landscapes, does not encounter here “an externalization of previously idealized forms” (Cunha 2006, 32). Cunha also suggests in this essay that landscape is perceived not directly, but through the conventions of landscape painting, that is, governed by aesthetic rules of variety, perspective, a limiting frame, and so forth. Yet even scientific apprehension and its technical means to segment nature fail in the face of this natural vastness and merely produce disconnected fragments, as Cunha writes in his preface to Alberto Rangel’s *Inferno verde* (1904):

That enormity, which can only be measured through division, escapes us all together; as does that amplitude, which must be diminished in order to evaluate it; that grandiosity that only reveals itself, belittling itself, through the microscope; and an infinity that can only be handled in small doses, little by little, very slowly, indefinitely, tortuously (Rangel 2001 [1908], 23).

Cunha’s verbal representations of the (a)temporal sensations of the traveling subject echo the frustrating visual experience, yet precisely for this reason it does not conjure up a visual picture of the landscape as such, or, for that matter, narrative units that would unfold in linear time. Cunha’s writing style seeks to capture that which is apparently situated outside of time and change, and yet is also “new”, insofar as it is marked as a frontier space awaiting further exploration and description. The peculiar rhetorical style of Cunha has been described as “baroque” by Mark Anderson, who detects in Cunha as well as in regional writers such as Rangel or the Colombian José Eustasio Rivera (*La Vorágine* [1924]) a folding of language, as the verbal equivalent for the challenges to cognition presented by the Amazonian landscape: “Each of them arrived in Amazonia armed with a toolbox of modern theoretical apparatuses only to find the implementation of modernity hampered by the Amazonian environment at the most basic level: that of corporeal perception” (Anderson 2014, 59).



Figure 1. Dana Merrill, Camps along the railway Madeira-Mamoré (1910). Acampamento ao Longo da Ferrovia Madeira-Mamoré – 669, Acervo do Museu Paulista da USP.

Since the beginning of photography in colonial Brazil, the medium had a central function in making the “disordered” tropical nature readable for the observer. It principally allowed for a more rational and persistent vision than the subjective-sensual impressions (or Bates’ optical instruments), yet it also reinstated the subject’s very capacity to delimit and frame nature and thereby gain, or claim control over it (Brizuela 2012, 96).

Maite Conde, in her recent book *Foundational Films*, has insisted on the central importance of photography and film within the modernizing self-understanding of the early Brazilian Republic (Conde 2018, 133). For instance, the Rondon commission (named after the engineer Cândido Rondon) was instituted in 1907, in order to connect the regions of Mato Grosso and the Amazon with telegraphic lines (a technology soon superseded by the invention of radio transmission). In this regard, Conde has emphasized how the images, mostly produced by the commission’s chief photographer, Major Luiz Thomasz Reis (installed by Rondon in 1912), employed certain iconographic conventions, thus yoking the notion of the natural sublime to the ideal of Republican modernity in Brazil: “By using a well-known artistic landscape, photographers domesticated the Amazon

to construct an image that enraptured but did not threaten” (Conde 2018, 151). Yet, as Conde is also careful to point out, the repeated use of images of visual order also expresses a need to counter the specter of this order becoming undone: “The staging of modernity in the jungle suggests a need to compulsively assert and reassert the commission’s labor in the face of the potential for nature to ‘unmake’ civilization” (Conde 2018, 153). In these photographs, the placing of often minute human figures in the immense landscape underscores the idea of the natural sublime, yet it also asserts the human capability to own and to transform the land, to literally connect it to the centers of power through the building of telegraph lines (Diacon 2004, 20-22).

Another series of symptomatic photographs of a parallel project was produced by the North American photographer Dana B. Merrill, who was contracted by the Brazil Railway Company, financed by North American capital in order to document the construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railway (1907-1912). This railway line was intended for the transportation of rubber and for the communication between distant areas, by overcoming the difficulties for transport by the two rivers. Of the circa 2000 negatives fewer than 200 have survived.² The photographs taken by Merrill, partly rediscovered during the 1990s by Francis Foot Hardman, constitute the most important visual record of the building of the railroad, providing insight into the various stages of construction as well as the living conditions of the workers, of which more than 10 000 died in the process (Martins 2013, 46). Yet Merrill’s images cannot be reduced to demonstrating the control of nature by technology, or even the latter’s failure to do so, for frequently they show the mutual entanglement between nature and technology (Valereto 2018, 161). For instance, one image (Fig. 1) shows the train tracks literally coming out of, and blending with nature. The framing by the camera anticipates the future movement of the train through the cleared forest.

In his travel journal *O Turista Aprendiz* (The Apprentice Tourist) and the accompanying photographs Mário de Andrade (1893-1945) follows in the tracks of previous voyagers and explorers to the Amazon. While he reworked the material (which was only posthumously published) over several years, he also incorporated a number of literary references, for in-

2 They are held in the collection of the Museu Paulista da Universidade de São Paulo (MP/USP).

stance to H. W. Bates, long after the actual voyage (Andrade 2015, 159). As the ludic title of the work indicates, Andrade's voyage had no utilitarian motives and is certainly not "touristic" in the conventional sense. As we will see, the project's main intention was the development of an aesthetic strategy meant to counter dominant narratives of modernity.

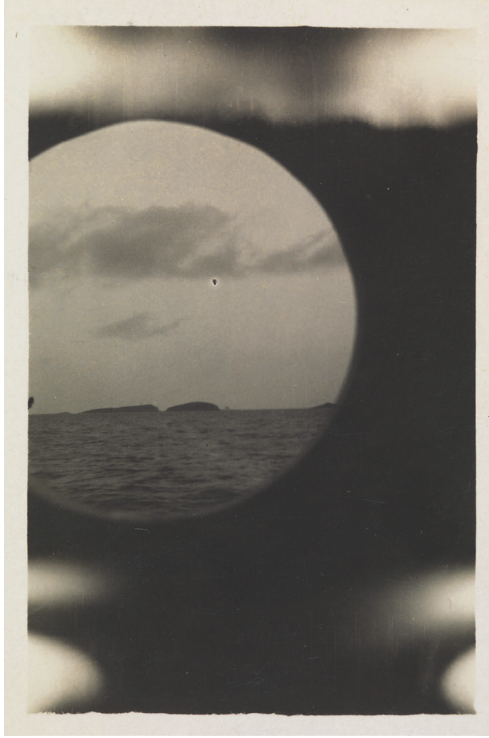


Figure 2. Mário de Andrade, *Abrolhos* ("Reefs"), May 13, 1927. Arquivo IEB-USP, Fundo Mário de Andrade, Código de referência: MA-F-0142.

In August 1927, Andrade began his voyage on the river Amazon, into Peru, the river Madeira, until Bolivia. During this personal "voyage of discovery" he was in the company of Olívia Guedes Penteadó (a prominent member of São Paulo's coffee aristocracy), her niece Margarida Guedes Nogueira and Dulce do Amaral Pinto (daughter of the famous modernist painter Tarsila do Amaral). Since at the time the Amazon was exposed to various forms of international exploration, travel, and economic exploitation, Andrade's

project has to be situated within the broader modernist spirit intent on ironizing or parodying Western hierarchical regimes of knowledge, including the mimicry of ethnographic knowledge production (Welge 2017, 511-513). As Euclides before him, Andrade self-consciously situates his own work in relation to the vast archive of previous writings about Amazonia:

Todos se propõem conhecedoríssimos das coisas desta pomposa Amazônia de que tiram uma fantástica vaidade improvável, “terra do futuro” [...]. Só quem sabe mesmo alguma coisa é a gente ignorante da terceira classe. Poucas vezes, a não ser entre os modernistas do Rio, tenho visto instrução mais desorientada que a deste gente, no geral falando inglês (Andrade 2015, 187).

This ironic attitude makes clear that Andrade distances himself not only from the practice of metropolitan travel, but also from an earlier phase of the Brazilian avant-garde, which he himself initiated (Rosenberg 2006, 110). His initial comments on the Amazon’s source, during his stay in Belém (19th May 1927) start from a similarly negative assessment as was the case in Cunha—namely the un-representability of the vast natural expanses. Yet he proposes to “frame” the panorama so as to better accommodate it to human possibilities of perception:

A foz do Amazonas é uma dessas grandezas tão grandiosas que ultrapassam as percepções fisiológicas do homem. [...] O que a retina bota na consciência é apenas um mundo de águas sujas e um matinho sempre igual no longe mal percebido das ilhas. O Amazonas prova decisivamente que a monotonia é um dos elementos mais grandiosos do sublime. [...] Pra gente gozar um bocado e perceber a variedade que tem nessas monotonias do sublime carece limitar em molduras mirins a sensação (Andrade 2015, 68).

This concern with finding visual frames that conform with a human perspective and even incorporate the positionality of the observing subject is given ample expression in the many photographs taken by Andrade to further document his trip, featuring the landscape but also its human inhabitants. A photo taken from the bull’s-eye window of a ship (Fig. 2), doubling as a metaphor for the camera lens as well as the human eye, has been analyzed in meta-visual terms in recent criticism (Gabara 2008; Canjani 2013; Kunigami 2020). This device may indeed be seen as paradigmatic for Andrade’s tendency to include in his photography, if only by implication, the corporeal presence of the spectator’s/photographer’s body (Lopez 2005, 146-149). Significantly, this photograph is the first of the circa 500 images recorded with his Kodak camera during his journey on the Amazon, most of them not published during his lifetime. This image shows, we might say,

the very act of looking. The photo cites the typical gaze of the colonial explorer, who is moving closer to the landscape, using a telescope to increase the optical proximity. While the round opening provides the frame for the focusing of the landscape (the image is entitled “Reefs”), the bright spots of light, likely stemming from over-exposure, falling on the surrounding dark field, destabilize the clear distinction between observer and observed landscape, and thereby foreground also the technical apparatus of the camera lens, that is, the medium of photography itself (Gabara 2008, 58).

In Andrade’s written travel journal occurs a remarkable passage in which the theme of visual desire is emphasized. As Andrade and his female fellow travelers come upon a group of people whose faces are disfigured by malaria (referred to with the term “maleita”), Olívia averts her face and hides in her cabin (“pra não ver aquela gente”, Andrade 2015, 117). When the group encounters a beautiful Black Peruvian boy, his face becomes an object both of the (queer) “tourist” gaze as well as a subject that refuses visual agency:

Fomos ver o tal moço e era realmente de uma beleza extraordinária de rosto, meio parecido com Richard Barthelmess [a famous Hollywood actor during this period, JW]. Mas inteiramente devorado pela maleita, [...]. As meninas ficaram assanhadíssimas e, como deixavam todo mundo olhando e desejando elas, principiaram fazendo tudo pra o rapaz ao menos virar o rosto e as espiar. Pois ele não olhou. [...] Então desejei ser maleteiro, assim, nada mais me interessar neste mundo em que tudo me interessa por demais [...] (Andrade 2015, 118).

This remarkable passage equates vision with knowledge or curiosity. Therefore, one might read this scene as Andrade’s somewhat utopian way to radically dissociate himself from Western regimes of knowledge. One might also relate this to the sense of apathetic sloth that Andrade attributed to the titular hero of his best-known literary work, the novel *Macunaíma* (1928), which was written more or less simultaneously with the travel journal. In a later chronicle Andrade posits even more explicitly the idea that the Amazon escapes the framework of modern civilization and its concomitant modes of knowledge production:

A curiosidade é o elemento primário de progresso. [...] Curiosidade é maldição. E nas terras de calor vasto é simplesmente made in Germany, [...]. Por isso eu sonho com a maleita, que há-de acabar minha curiosidade e aclamará minha desgraçada vaidade de precisar ser alguém nesta concorrência aqui no Sul (Andrade 1976, 459).

Andrade indulges here in primitivist fantasies that circumvent the fact that his perception of the malaria-infected boy is itself inflected by modernity, namely by the image of the Hollywood actor, as transmitted through the quintessentially modern medium of film (Kunigami 2020, 384). Moreover, the parasitic illness of malaria is not a sign of “authentic” nature, but rather a side-effect of the working conditions during the period of the rubber boom, even as the whole discourse of modern tropical science was heavily invested in eradicating this problem of hygiene (Stepan 2001, 176). In fact, the contemporary discourse of tropical science, including the medical research on malaria conducted by the Oswaldo Cruz Institute, constituted “a field of knowledge, where it is hard to dissociate science from politics” (Botelho and Lima 2019, 155). As for Andrade’s phantasies of escaping modernity, André Kunigami has interpreted this scene as paradigmatic for a desire of experiential and perceptual immediacy (Kunigami 2020, 386). Yet Andrade’s primitivist fantasy is certainly a self-conscious one. Thus, there are scenes in the journal where he plays with the idea of willfully “suspending acquired knowledge” (Andrade 2015, 181), namely with regard to the appreciation of indigenous art.

As Andrade found himself on board the train of the Madeira-Mamoré line at the border to Bolivia, he commented on the many international workers who died in the process of its construction. On the one hand, Andrade points out how the vision of the landscape from the moving train is linked with other practices of the “tourist” gaze, such as photography and film: “Às vezes se para, as paisagens serão codaquizadas, até cinema se traz! pra [sic] pegar em nossos orgulhos futuros a palhoça exótica” (Andrade 2015, 159). On the other hand, he realizes his own implication in the system of modernity—and the specters of the railway’s construction: “O que eu vim fazer aqui! [...] Qual a razão de todos esses mortos internacionais que renascem na bulha da locomotiva e vêm com seus olhinhos de luz fraca me espiar pelas janelinhas do vagão?” (Andrade, 2015). Such scenes speak to the ways in which the observer does not only look out at the landscape, but that he perceives himself also as being looked at.

Conclusion

In the course of this brief essay, I have focused on a succession of historical moments within the longer period of modernity that are concerned with the visual representation of Amazonian nature. The examples of Bates

and Cunha have been discussed as prototypical strategies for dealing with the problem of how to translate visual, perceptive experience into writing. During the 1920s the “official” and corporate photography of the 1920s, embedded in developmental enterprises, aims to affirm images of order and progress, even as nature is sometimes granted an active role. In the concluding example, we have seen how the self-stylized “apprentice tourist” Mário de Andrade follows to some extent in the tracks of the literature of Amazonian exploration; yet his ironical travelogue is not primarily intended to produce knowledge, but rather to subvert the practice of the neo-colonial, objectifying gaze as well as to show the desire for cultural and natural purity in an ironic light. Subverting the conventional alliance between photography and mimetic documentation, Andrade uses the camera for an ethical-affective vision about the acquisition of knowledge. In this sense his project provides an irreverent counter-example to the “official” and corporate photography of the 1920s and, more generally, modernity’s contradictory attempts to reign in the Amazon’s unruly sublime. These various attempts, discursive and visual techniques, are all affected by what they set out to represent.

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