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German Views of Amazonia through the Centuries

Amazonia has been called “...the most exuberant celebration of life ever to have existed on earth.”ⁱ It has been a botanical, zoological and hydrographic party for the ages. Over the past five centuries, German conquistadors, missionaries, explorers, empresses, naturalists, travelers, immigrants and cultural interpreters have been conspicuous among Europeans fascinated by the biodiversity and native peoples of an incomparably vast basin stretching from the Andes to the Atlantic, from the Guiana Highlands to Peru and Bolivia, from Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador to the mouth of the Amazon at the Brazilian equator.

Exactly two thousand years ago, in the summer of the year 9, a decisive victory of Germanic tribes over occupying Roman legions took place in a forest near a swamp. With that the Roman Empire began its final decline, and some would say the event was the seed of germination for the eventual German nation. For at least that long, I would contend, German culture has displayed a uniquely reverential view of its own forest. In a 1983 interview, Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl said: “Mythology, Germans and the forest – they all belong together.”ⁱⁱ

Thus, it is a natural consequence that the cultural reflections of the forest found in German culture should be transmuted into the New World.

Five persistent forest themes found in German culture through the centuries can be summarized as the following: (1) taming the external and internal wilderness, (2) establishing social justice, (3) advocating national unity, (4) maintaining a sense of the sacred, and (5) encouraging ecological awareness. With the possible exception of advocating national unity, the other four themes

can be seen transplanted from German woods to German views of Amazonian woods.

Two millennia ago, Germany was densely forested: paleobotanists tell us it was more than 90 percent woodland, compared to about 20 percent now. Thus, the Amazon of today resembles closely, at least in mind and emotion, the residual image of primeval German woodlands. There are distinct differences that cannot be overlooked, of course: the vast Amazon River network with over 1100 tributaries and the tropical nature of the vegetation. So to some extent, the Amazonian rainforest has served for European explorers as a botanical “other,” not in the sense that the ancient groves of Greece and Rome serve as a historically lost “other,” but in the sense of a promising alternative future rich in resources.

Concurrent with the first generation of conquistadors in the New World there was a German-dominated attempt at colonizing New Granada, a failed experiment in gold-supply-side economics. In 1528 Holy Roman Emperor (and simultaneous King of Spain) Charles V granted a license for the rich Augsburg-based family of merchants and bankers, the Welsers, to take control of Venezuela, that is, Little Venice (in German, *Klein-Venedig*).ⁱⁱⁱ

The first governor, Ambrosius Ehinger, began expeditions to the south and west in 1529, some of which extended into Colombia. These and other expeditions were a search for El Dorado to enrich the personal fortunes as much as to swell the imperial coffers, and Ehinger and the German governors to follow him were no less averse to brutality and enslavement of the natives than were conquistadors from other European nations. While Ehinger was recuperating from malaria in 1530, his deputy and ultimate successor, Nikolaus Federmann,

made an unauthorized expedition to the basin of the Orinoco River. He was astonished to find that vast stretches between the tributaries flooded into virtual oceans at certain times of the year. This expedition became the basis for a book published in 1557, *Indianische Historia*, etc., the abridged title of which translates as “History of the Indians: A Delightful and Entertaining History of the First Journey of Nikolaus Federmann the Younger of Ulm.”^{iv} This was one of the few European sources of description for the region until Humboldt two and a half centuries later. The third governor of Venezuela, Georg Hohermuth von Speyer, returned from his expeditions empty handed. The final German governor, Philipp von Hutten, was a relative and contemporary of Ulrich von Hutten, the Reformation-era humanist who had referred to the specific stretch of German forest where the Roman legions had been defeated as the birthplace of the German nation. The Venezuelan forest, into which Philipp von Hutten disappeared for five years while seeking gold, sealed the fate for him and for the German colony, since the Spaniard Juan de Carvajal had usurped the governorship in Hutten’s absence. Bibliographically, the world was to see Hutten’s diaries and letters published as *Zeitung aus India*,^v but only after a delay of over two centuries.

Thus by 1556, after just 28 years, the German governors of Venezuela had all come to their ends, having died, respectively, of a poisoned arrow in the neck; in a Spanish prison in Valladolid; of malaria; and executed by a Spanish successor. The empire rethought its priorities, traces of a German economic colonization ebbed away, and the names of the leaders were hispanicized to

Ambrosio Alfínger, Nicolás de Federmán, Jorge de la Espira, and Felipe de Hutten.

Another entirely different variety of German colonizer was spirit-seeking rather than gold-seeking: the Jesuits. Thus, the national origins of the German-speaking Jesuits were of little importance. Once again, German surnames morphed: Stanzel became Estancíl and Sedlmeyer became Sotomayor. High regard for Jesuits among many of the native populations was highlighted in an anonymous volume from 1629 dealing extensively with the landscape and peoples of Brazil. The Portuguese conquistadors, we read, took shameful advantage of the Indians' respect by dressing as Jesuits to lure them to places they could be captured *en masse*. The book in question was published in Frankfurt am Main, and its title begins with "The Twenty First Voyage."^{vi} Now available online as part of the full-text Sabin Americana database, this German-language book purports to present a thorough and comprehensive description of Brazil, along with its inhabitants and its customs. And in fact the first three chapters do enumerate, if not strongly differentiate, languages and customs of a good number of native tribes. Typical for the early 17th century are oddities in illustration: the title page shows elephants and camels in a cartoon version of South America.

Europeans had referred to the entire Amazon River, all the way to its mouth, as the Marañón until the middle of the 16th century. One of the Germanic Jesuits of the late seventeenth century in Ecuadorean and Peruvian Amazonia, Samuel Fritz – despite a dearth of cartographic instruments – prepared the first

relatively accurate map of the Upper Marañón territory and was able to prove that its source was other than had been assumed at the time.

It would be hard to overstate Alexander von Humboldt's importance and primacy in exploring and exposing Amazonian mysteries to the world. In 1807 Humboldt was the first reliable witness to document how *curare*, the arrow poison, is prepared, a pharmaceutical process that now saves lives.^{vii} It was Humboldt who first applied the term "Hylea" to the region. Hylea is the Greek word for "great forest," an umbrella term for the region that was adopted by UNESCO in the late 1940s with its "Institute for the Hylean Amazon." Helping to put into perspective the accomplishments of Humboldt and his companion Bonpland a century and a half earlier, UNESCO reported in 1947 that the region still possessed "untapped natural resources which are virtually unexplored from the scientific point of view."^{viii}

Humboldt's first letters from Cumaná – a few days after having just landed on the South American coast – give us a glimpse into the mixture of scientific curiosity and aesthetic wonderment that he revealed in.

Up till now we've been running around like fools. In the first three days we couldn't classify anything, since we were always tossing one object aside to grab the next. Bonpland assures me that he will go crazy if the marvels don't stop soon. But lovelier still than these individual marvels is the impression made by the entirety of this powerful, luxuriant and yet light, cheerful, gentle plant nature.^{ix}

Even a cursory reading of Humboldt shows that the exquisite details we find so fascinating are byproducts of an overwhelming sense of holistic totality. For the Classical and Romantic periods in Germany, which influenced Humboldt, the forest fulfilled two of the aesthetic ideals: unity in variety (a botanical *e pluribus unum* if you will) and harmony in chaos. Despite the individual intricacies he documents, despite his fascination with precise measurements, Humboldt's guiding principle is the "total impression" (*Totaleindruck*). This is a concept found so often and so powerfully in his writings that to avoid repetition he coined synonymous phrases like "total view" (*Totalbetrachtung*), "total organization" (*Totalgestaltung*), "overall result" (*Gesamtresultat*) and "overall effect" (*Gesamtwirkung*).^x Another important aspect he conjoins to this same unity is "mood" (*Stimmung*), another central element of German Romanticism. To some degree, this seems to be a way of attaching scientific rigor and empirical importance to an aesthetic and moral conclusion.

In Humboldt's observations of Amazonia and beyond, it is a curious mix of emotion and intellect that is called forth, in his own phrase, "to stimulate simultaneously the desire for knowledge and imagination."^{xi} The attempt to scale Mount Chimborazo, the highest known mountain of his day, was representative of such a mix between adventure and science. In a chronological sense, Humboldt's Latin American explorations took place between the Enlightenment and German Romanticism, and his own proclivities seem to not only straddle, but also bridge, the rational with the aesthetic. Besides delineating the watershed of the Orinoco from that of the Amazon as a geographer, besides categorizing closely related species of plants as a botanist, he did similar service as a

philosopher. Taking note of Kant's mistrust of our ability to know anything directly, he intimately studied Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* (philosophy of nature), as adopted and interpreted by Goethe, and then took it upon himself in the wilds of South America to search for meaning in living and inanimate objects, to pull order together from the chaos.^{xii} Soon after returning home from his five-year explorations to begin 30 years of publishing and reporting on them, he said in a letter:

In the forests of the Amazon River, as well as on the back of the high Andes, I realized that from one pole to the other, as if animated by a breath, only one life suffuses stones, plants and animals, and the swelling breast of man. Everywhere I was permeated with the feeling ...[that] I, elevated by Goethe's views of nature, was, as it were, equipped with new organs.^{xiii}

If Kant had written in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that our senses are not to be trusted, Humboldt replies that Amazonia has supplied him with new senses.

The uppermost rung in the hierarchy of elements that form Humboldt's overall mood or total impression is in the botanical realm; he is known as a botanical geographer. His eye was mainly on the vegetation. I ascribe that fact partially to his German-ness, to his inherited and learned awe of forest elements. Prior to his South American expedition he had corresponded with Goethe on the subject scientifically and literarily and had published on the physiology and physiognomy of plants.

At the same time, Humboldt has been mischaracterized by some critics as having been hostile or indifferent to the native peoples of the area. In fact, much

of that rap in the Anglo-American world can be traced back to translation problems, more problems of abridgement and limited availability than of quality. In his full writings, it can be found that he was an abolitionist and a proponent of social transformation. He described ancient Native American civilizations as being the equal of the ancient civilizations of Europe, Africa and Asia. Humboldt did not leave out the inhabitants, but many of the English selections of his work did. On the near horizon, over the next five years, will come newly translated and faithfully critical editions of Humboldt's works by the University of Chicago Press.

What fascinates me about Humboldt is that more than a century before the word "interdisciplinary" came into usage^{xiv} he put into practice his dictum that "everything is interrelated," performing unions between the humanities and the sciences, between the natural world and the imagined world, between reality and fantasy. In the latter category, fantasy, he did not shy away from the primal expressive power of the subconscious as revealed by his contemporaries, the Brothers Grimm. Of the Yanomami tribes at the tabletop mountains of the Guianas, he concluded: "Above the great cataracts of the Orinoco a mythical land begins, the soil of fable and fairy vision."^{xv} (As an aside, the very tabletop mountains mentioned by Humboldt as fairy tale fodder became the dream destination for Pixar Animation Studios' film, *Up*.)

Following naturally from Humboldt's unifying holism are his observations of interactive dynamism between land, water and air; as well as balance between organisms and their environment. He approached terrestrial nature from the standpoint of a self-regulating ecosystem while opposing the idea of a pristine

harmony between man and nature. Man forms a separate system of cultivation, he would say, and nature is not immutable. In these views he was a proto-ecologist more than half a century before Ernst Haeckel established ecology as a science.^{xvi}

News accounts of Humboldt and Bonpland's scientific adventures, and later their books, caused a sensation in Europe and became the inspiration for later German expeditions to the jungles and rivers of the Amazon. None of these future expeditions were as virtual as those of Goethe. Perhaps too often I have mentioned Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832) as a correspondent and botanical colleague of Humboldt. In fact, Goethe, the author of *Faust*, the searcher for the *Urpflanze*, for the original or archetypal plant, was himself an enthusiastic Brazilianist despite never having crossed the Atlantic. Much of his interest can be traced back to Humboldt's letters, reports and books. But the interest did not stop there: Goethe's diary entries indicate more than 200 separate days spent in studying the flora of Brazil *in absentia*. He was in contact with other researchers and debriefed travelers from Amazonia in his home, saying that their company gave him a certain recompense for the joys of a trip his old age would no longer allow him.^{xvii} We have the great good luck that Goethe's library was preserved intact. In it, at his former home in Weimar, now a museum, we find numerous works dealing with South America, especially works by Humboldt and works on Brazil and its flora.

Goethe's diary entries for the year 1825 indicate a close relationship with, and receipt of botanical specimens from, Carl Philipp von Martius, who, with the zoologist Johann von Spix, had undertaken to explore the Amazon Basin from

1817-1820 in parallel fashion to Humboldt's exploration of the Orinoco. Martius and Spix covered over 10,000 kilometers in those years, documenting plant and animal forms, native tribes and their customs up the Amazon and its tributaries to the borders of Peru and Colombia. Their significant 600-piece collection can be seen in Munich's Museum of Ethnology.^{xviii}

Maximilian I of Habsburg, Austrian by birth, held strong Germanic forest views, especially due to his early interest and training in botany. In 1860, before accepting the offer of Mexican monarchists to become Emperor, he set out on a botanical expedition to the Brazilian interior. While there, in January of 1860, he wrote a number of poems in German, one of which I have translated.

Railroad in the Primeval Forest

With whistle shrill, the train is soon departing,
Rattling off, driven by steam power blunt;
A monster, soon it's rushing wildly, it's darting
Faster than stallions frothing on a hunt.

On shiny tracks it snorts ahead half crazy
Through palm cathedrals tall and unabating;
New paths through darkest jungle blazing,
Primal untouched thresholds desecrating.

And timidly the natives, as it nears,
Flee millennial ancestral sites,

The forests wither when white men appear,
And slavery supplants their children's rights.

Slender vines, liana, shake on high,
Encompassed by hot smoke that rises higher;
Mighty plants are wilting, here they die,
While vegetation, reeds and grasses, catch on fire.

The tips bow down upon the tallest treetops,
Flowers let their petals droop with sorrow,
All nature must recoil when holy peace stops:
No god can give it back again tomorrow.

And animals rush off in throngs from wilderness
While birds fly out, escaping from the jungle,
For now their verdant house is robbed of stillness
And they're without their rights where train tracks rumble!

In victory the conqueror moves in by steam
With brandy sweet, with felling axe in hand,
God's wide world is his alone, or so it seems,
And – Christian doctrine should illuminate the land.^{xix}

At times melodramatically, at times sarcastically, the 27-year-old Maximilian combined concepts of technology on the attack, ecological ruin, social injustice, colonial arrogance and twisted priorities of the sacred. It seems paradoxical that he, as a European, then accepted the invitation to become Emperor of Mexico.

The Amazon, in an age of CO₂ emissions and global warming, deserves to be called the “lungs of the world,”^{xx} since recent measurements show that the region is still a net consumer of CO₂ and a net supplier of oxygen. With a view of Amazonia’s natural resources, but also its peoples, Author Stefan Zweig, who fled Vienna in 1934 and eventually immigrated to Brazil in 1941, considered Europe and its culture the “World of Yesterday” (the name of one of his books) and thought of Brazil as a “Land of the Future” (the title of another of his books).

The Amazonian films of Werner Herzog, first *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (in 1972) and then *Fitzcarraldo* (in 1982) involve suffering in the midst of a green hell. The Basque conquistador rebel Aguirre is shown going increasingly insane on water in search of solid ground, while the Irish rubber baron Fitzcarraldo is shown on land with his 320-ton steamship, desperately seeking navigable water. Herzog’s attitude no doubt mirrors his own struggles to complete the films without special effects in the midst of political intrigue, logistical disaster, the death of crew members in remote areas of Peruvian Amazonia,^{xxi} and an offer by natives, during the staging of *Fitzcarraldo*, to murder the rebellious main actor Klaus Kinski, an offer allegedly refused only because Kinski was needed to complete the film.

Herzog’s Amazon is not Humboldt’s ordered and Romantic botanical wild. Where Humboldt had seen order in chaos and unity in diversity, Herzog sees

“overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order.”^{xxii} There are no fairy tales to fall back on. There is only a green hell to be feared, not befriended: the brute force of nature that can destroy human ambitions. At the same time, it is a Herzogian cultural landscape; the director confessed that he was forever in search of a landscape “unembarrassed by man.”^{xxiii}

In *Aguirre*, the first of the two films, Herzog shows how the Western mind fails to grasp the cyclical force of the tropical ecosystem. At one point in the drama this is graphically presented with an actual whirlpool. In a larger sense, the Amazon itself is the conquistador over European man, the indifferent vortex into which lives can disappear. One critic has written: “...it is safe to venture that, as Herzog construes him, Man, led by indeterminate causes, is a maniac or the victim of maniacs...”^{xxiv} The concept of the maniacal quest in *Aguirre* is not unexpected for a postwar German director

...fascinated by the story of a diabolical dictator who ruthlessly leads an expedition toward collective disaster. The historical parallels with Hitler are obvious -- In short, Herzog’s depiction of Aguirre’s mad quest for El Dorado portrays the rain forest as a green hell, a remote and isolated environment in which the dangers of charismatic dictatorship and insanity find their tragic conclusion...^{xxv}

Because of time constraints, I cannot detail further expeditions, artistic works and publications: by Hans Staden (16th century) who survived cannibals for a very unexpected reason (the tribe who captured him routinely believed that they could imbibe the moral virtues as well as the calories of their captors, and

they found Staden to be cowardly);^{xxvi} Richshoffer (17th century), whose travel description was published in Strassburg 30 years after the 30 Year's War;^{xxvii} Wilhelm Ludwig von Eschwege^{xxviii} and Prinz von Wied^{xxix} (both shortly after Humboldt and both inspired by Humboldt); Prinz Adalbert of Prussia (mid 19th century),^{xxx} one of a number of royals whose diaries, and lives, were considered incomplete without relating Amazon travel, or their cushioned version of it; the artist Johann Georg Grimm (1880s), the explorers Meyer and Koch-Grünberg (late 19th and early 20th century),^{xxxi} the German Amazonas-Jary geographic-ethnographic expedition under Otto Schulz-Kampfhenkel (1935-36)^{xxxii} and a number of others.

Yet now, after all that has been said and witnessed by other cultures, it is time for the people of Amazonia to define themselves and to work toward their own future.

Notes

- i Robert Holdstock, *John Boorman's The Emerald Forest* (New York: New York Zoetrope, 1985), 205.
- ii Helmut Kohl. Interview, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 14, 1983.
- iii Venezuela as “Little Venice” is said to have been named by Amerigo Vespucci in 1499 after he saw villages built over water there.
- iv Nikolaus Federmann, *Indianische Historia: Ein schöne kurtzweilige Historia Niclaus Federmanns des Jüngern von Ulm erster Raise so er von Hispania vn[d] Andolosia ausz in Indias des Oceanischen Mörs gethan hat und was ihm allda ist begegnet biss auff sein Widerkunfft inn Hispaniam auffs kurtzest beschriben gantz lustig zuo lesen.* (Hagenau: S. Bund, 1557).
- v Philipp von Hutten, *Das Gold der Neuen Welt: Die Papiere des Welser Konquistadors und General-kapitäns von Venezuela, Philipp von Hutten, 1534-1541.* (Hildburghausen: Verlag Frankenschwelle, 1996).
- vi *Die Ein und Zwanzigste Schiffahrt, Oder, Gründliche und umbständliche fernere Beschreibung der vollkommnesten Landschafft Brasilien Americae und deroselben Innwohner und Sitten...* ([Frankfurt am Mayn]: bey Wolfgang Hoffman, 1629). .
- vii “Curare, Mysterious Arrow Poison that Saves Lives,” *IBMC News*, VII, 11 (2003): 4.
- viii *Cellular and Molecular Life Sciences (CMLS)*, III, 5 (1947): 212.
- ix Ulrike Moheit, ed., *Das Gute und Große wollen. Alexander von Humboldts amerikanische Briefe* (Berlin: Rohrwall, 1999), 26.
- x Chenxi Tang, *The Geographic Imagination of Modernity: Geography, Literature, and Philosophy in German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 84.
- xi Alexander von Humboldt, *Schriften zur Geographie der Pflanzen*, ed. Hanno Beck (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 70-71.

xii Tang, 120-121.

xiii Humboldt letter to Caroline von Wolzogen, 14 May 1806, cited in his *Aus meinem Leben*, 180.

xiv 1937 is the first appearance of “inter-disciplinary” as noted by the Oxford English Dictionary.

xv As quoted by Patrick Tierney, *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*. (New York: Norton, c2000), 12.

xvi Tang, pp. 169-170. Also see Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), II, 286.

xvii Sylk Schneider, *Goethes Reise nach Brasilien: Gedankenreise eines Genies* (Weimar: WTV, 2008).

xviii *Brasilianische Reise 1817-1820: Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius zum 200. Geburtstag* (München: Hirmer, 1994), 11.

xix Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico, *Aus meinem Leben: Reiseskizzen, Aphorismen, Gedichte* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1867), VII, 272-273.

xx Nicomedes Suárez-Araúz, *Literary Amazonia: Modern Writing by Amazonian Authors* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 11.

xxi Brian J. Godfrey, “Regional Depiction in Contemporary Film,” *Geographical Review*, 83, 4 (1993): 429.

xxii Blank, Les and James Bogan (eds.), *Burden of Dreams: Screenplay, Journals, Reviews, Photographs* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1984), 243.

xxiii Vernon Young, “Much Madness: Werner Herzog and Contemporary German Cinema,” *The Hudson Review*, 30, 3 (Autumn, 1977), 414.

xxiv Young, 412.

xxv Godfrey, 433.

xxvi Hans Staden, *Hans Staden, the True History of His Captivity, 1557* (London: G. Routledge & Sons Ltd., [1928]).

xxvii Ambrosius Richshoffer, *Ambrosij Richshoffers Brassilianisch- und West Indianische Reise Beschreibung* (Strassburg: Bei Jossias Städeln, 1677).

xxviii Wilhelm Ludwig von Eschwege, *Journal von Brasilien, oder, Vermischte Nachrichten aus Brasilien* (Weimar: Im Verlage des Gr. H. S. pr. Landes-Industries-Comptoirs, 1818).

xxix Maximilian Wied, *Travels in Brazil, in the Years 1815, 1816, 1817* (London: Printed for H. Colburn, 1820).

xxx Adalbert, Prinz von Preussen. *Reise Seiner Königlichen Hoheit des Prinzen Adalbert von Preussen nach Brasilien* (Berlin: Hasselberg, 1857).

xxxi Find reference...

xxxii Schulz-Kampfenkel, Otto. *Rätsel der Urwaldhöhle; Ein Expeditionsbericht aus Amazonien von der ersten Süd-Nord-Durchquerung Brasilianisch-Guayanas auf dem Rio Jar*. (Berlin: Ullstein, 1953).

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Indias des Oceanischen Mörs gethan hat und was ihm allda ist begegnet biss auff sein Widerkunfft inn Hispaniam auffs kurtzest beschriben gantz lustig zuo lesen. (Hagenau: S. Bund, 1557).

(Story of the Indies: A Great and Entertaining Story of Nikolaus Federmann the Younger of Ulm's First Voyage When He Set Out from Spain and Andalusia into the Indies of the Oceanic Sea and All That Happened to Him There Up Until His Return to Spain, Very Descriptive and Entertaining Reading)

Florians von der Fleschen wunderbarliche seltzame abentheurliche Schiffarten vnd Reysen welche er kurtz verwichner Zeit, in die Neue Welt gethan.

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(Fictional takeoff on Hans Staden memoirs along the lines of a Robinson Crusoe: Florian von der Flesh's Marvelous Strange Adventurous Voyages and Travels, Which he Made to the New World a Short Time Ago)

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