Travel, Monsters, and Taxidermy: the Semiotic Patterns of Gullibility

Viajes , monstruos y Taxidermia: Los patrones semióticos de la credulidad.

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Abstract
Early modern travelogues often strove to convey efficacious representations of newly discovered worlds (plants, animals, people, customs, etc.) to an increasingly curious European readership. At the dawn of modernity, the new scientific discourse clashed and frequently blurred with the medieval passion for monsters, resulting in paradoxical arrangements of words and images. To semioticians, these hybrid texts are extremely precious, for they reveal how symbols, icons, and sometimes also indexes variously combine in relating the unknown to common sense while pleasing the curiosity of readers. The essay concentrates, in particular, on Melchisédech Thé-venot's Relation de divers voyages curieux, a monumental 17th century collection of previous travelogues, which sought to present and often validate the bizarre findings of ancient and me-dieval explorations through the frame of a modern, pseudoscientific edition. The current reader probably does not believe in the same monsters as the early modern aficionado of travelogues would, yet the public discourse is still grappling with the issue of determining what is true, what is false, and what is a paradoxical mixture of both in the present-day circulation of words, images, and relics.

Key words: Travelogues; monsters; curiosity; iconicity; gullibility; scientific rhetoric

Resumen
Relatos modernos tempranos a menudo se esforzaban para transmitir eficaces representaciones de mundos recién descubiertos (plantas, animales, personas, costumbres, etc.) a un lector euro-peo cada vez más curioso. En los albores de la modernidad, el nuevo discurso científico se en-frentaron y frecuentemente borrosa con la pasión medieval por monstruos, dando por resultado paradójico arreglos de palabras e imágenes. A semióticos, estos textos híbridos son muy preciosos, que revelan cómo símbolos, iconos y a veces también índices combinan diversamente en rela-ción con lo desconocido al sentido común y satisfaciendo la curiosidad de los lectores. El ensayo se concentra, en particular, en curieux de Melchisédech Thévenot relación de divers voyages, una colección monumental del siglo XVII de relatos anteriores, que intentaron presentar y validar a menudo los extraños resultados de exploraciones antiguas y medievales a través del marco de una edición moderna, pseudoscientific. El lector actual probablemente no cree en los monstruos de la misma como el aficionado moderno temprano de relatos de viaje sería, sin embargo, el discurso público todavía está lidiando con el problema de determinar lo que es cierto, lo que es falso, y lo que es una mezcla paradójica de ambos en la actual circulación de palabras, imágenes y reliquias.

Palabras clave: Relatos de viaje; monstruos; curiosidad; iconicidad; credulidad; retórica científica

> This mode of communicating sentiments as an inexplicable puzzle to Finow... He thought a little within himself; but his thoughts reflected no light upon the subject. At length he sent for Mr. Mariner, and desired him to write down something: the latter asked what he would choose to have written; he replied, put down me: he accordingly wrote, "Feenow" (spelling it ccording to the strict English orthography); the chief then sent for another Englishman who had not been present, and commanding Mr. Mariner to turn his back, and look another way, he gave the man the paper, and desired him to tell what that it was: he accordingly pronounced aloud the name of the king, upon which Finow snatched the paper from his hand, and, with astonishment, looked at it, turned it round, and examined it in all directions: at length he exclaimed, "This is neither myself not any body else! Where are my eyes, where is my head? — where are my legs? — How can you possibly know to be I?"
>
> (William Mariner[1] and John Martin,[2] An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands in the South Pacific Ocean, 1817)

Introduction

At the beginning of modernity, the European exploration and colonization of the world raised a both cognitive and communicational problem: how to transmit to the readership of the Old Continent the idea of the exotic nature that was discovered in the eastern and in the western "Indies"? Confronted with this issue, the rhetoric of the early modern European traveler deployed all sorts of signs, discourses, and texts meant to evoke in their receivers a double effect of meaning, paradoxically combining a feeling of verisimilitude and one of marvel. The comparative analysis of words, images, and indexes of this rhetoric bears on a both theoretical and historical issue. In it, one can read, between the lines, the progressive elaboration of the modern European episteme, wherein signs of different types organize in alternative ways the relation between reality and meaning, truth and verisimilitude. The early modern representation of 'monsters', in particular, inherits the previous abundant tradition of ancient and medieval depiction of monstrousness, yet it frames it within a new rhetorical context, which bestows credibility to words, and especially to images, by exploiting the semiotic rules of referentialization that still dominate the current rhetoric of veridiction.

The present essay does not aim at contributing to the extensive bibliography on monsters[3]. Zoological and botanical anomalies have already been thoroughly studied from different perspectives (natural sciences, literature, history of art, intellectual history, etc.) and in relation to various epochs (from the very first 'accounts' of monsters to the descriptions of contemporary teratology)[4]. Neither has the essay any ambition in the scholarship of such a vast research field as travel literature, whose critical analyses are countless. Instead, the essay will seek to cast new light on the semiotic differences between verbal and visual texts through an enquiry into relations between teratology and travel literature. Many examples will be drawn from 17th-century travelogues and zoological works, first of all, for the concoction of medieval fabulous thought and modern scientific rationality that characterizes this century offers an advantageous point of view on the topic; second, for these travelogues heavily rely on images as a visual rhetorical means to acquire credibility.

Illustrations were an essential element of early modern book printing. The evolution of engraving techniques in the 16th and 17th centuries allowed publishers to print more and more lavishly illus-

1 1791–1853

2 Haydon Bridge, Northumberland, England, 19 July 1789 - Isle of Man, 17 February 1854.

3 See Lascault 1973, Kappler 1980, Céard 1996, Ancet 2006, Roux 2008, Borgards, Holm, and Oesterle 2009, Vignolo 2009, Nestawal 2010, Martinez 2011, Mittman and Dendle 2012, Picart and Browning 2012, Hendrik 2013, Milcent 2013, Sax 2013, Wright 2013.

4 See Berger de Xivrey 1836, Geoffrey de St-Hilaire 1832-7, Martin 1880, Taruffi 1881-94, Schwalbe 1932, Grässe 1986.

trated books. Technical progress in 'image-making' sought to satisfy an increasing demand for 'portable' images. In the 15th century and in the first half of the 16th, words had become 'portable' thanks to the invention and the enhancement of mechanical movable type printing. In the second half of the 16th century and especially in the 17th, images followed the same path: readers wanted to become viewers, look at images as they read and keep them in a private, transportable format.

The early modern increase in both supply and demand of illustrated books was stimulated by — and in its turn stimulated — an important cultural change: Europeans were more and more driven by the desire of visually exploring the unknown. Illustrations played a fundamental role in the early modern 'market of curiosity': readers wanted to vicariously observe the mysterious interior of the human body and be transported to distant and exotic territories. Words seemed to suffice no more so as to convey the idea of what scientific research and geographic exploration were discovering, respectively, in the microcosm and in the macrocosm. The early modern passion for anatomic treatises and travelogues was no longer only verbal but also and predominantly visual: readers wished to see the unknown, and a new industry of book printing and image engraving sought to satisfy such demand, publishing richly illustrated anatomy disquisitions and travel accounts.

In no domain of early modern printing, illustrations were more fundamental than in the publication of books about the 'Indies'. What travelers — be they conquering soldiers, proselytizing missionaries, adventurous entrepreneurs, or natural scientists — were discovering in the 'new' lands was so unusual that words seemed incapable of describing it. Illustrations, usually engravings, had to accompany words in the effort to represent the new nature, as well as the new culture, of the non-European continents: the newly discovered species of plants and animals as well as the natives' 'bizarre' buildings, rituals, and customs. A flourishing trade of illustrated travelogues developed in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century, reaching its peak toward the end of the 17th.

Yet, the 'reality effect' that early modern travelogues evoked through visual representations was ambiguous: created by European visual artists for European viewers, both often with no experience of traveling, 16th- and 17th-century illustrations adopted conventional techniques and representative styles in order to evoke, nevertheless, a feeling of the 'visually unknown', while 'domesticating' it for the European audience.

Such ambiguity has recently become the object of a flourishing trend of scholarship in art history, visual studies, anthropology, and comparative literature[5]. However, no systematic research to date has been conducted on this subject from a semiotic point of view. The present essay is meant to fill this lacuna, starting from an enquiry into taxidermy.

1. Specimens of 'monsters'.

Jean-Baptiste Bécœur[6], apothecary at Metz, is reputed to have invented the formula of a revolutionary preservative. White arsenic, camphor, lime, potassium carbonate, and Marseille soap were mixed together in order to protect the carcasses of birds from necrophagous insects and, therefore, putrefaction. Yet, this 'miraculous' compound was devised only in the 18th century, and diffused from 1803-4 on under the name of "recette de Bécœur" [recipe of Bécœur] (Farber 1982:

5 See Quetsch 1983, Pratt 1992, Jacobs 1995, Chard and Langdon 1996, Phillips 1998, Gruzinski 1999, Blake 2005, Anderson 2006, Bruno 2007, Rees 2010, Sheriff 2010, Leone 2011, San Juan 2011, Wiese 2011, Guyon and Requemora-Gros 2012, and Leone 2014.

6 Metz, 16 April 1718 - 16 September 1777. On Bécoeur, see Fleur 1926.

54)[7]. Before this remarkable invention, the history of taxidermy is full of truculent techniques, which did not always succeed in maintaining the actual shape of animals. Christopher Stoate, taxidermist and historian of this practice, vividly describes the 'noble butchery':

> The complete removal of neck and body was the method favored by almost all taxidermists by the end of the eighteenth century. Leg and wing bones were cleaned and remained in the skin, and wires supporting neck, tail, and legs were twisted together in the center of the body or, in some cases, pushed through a cork. The body was stuffed with hemp as it was sewn up, and the bird was then positioned. There was little attention to anatomy, and the bones, which would otherwise have ensured some accuracy in this respect, had been removed. Specimens were consequently poor representations of the living animals. (Stoate 1987: 5)

Before this rudimentary surgery took place, animals would be traded from their original latitudes with no special care but glass bottles (better if squared) and adventitious alcohols. *The Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* of 1828-29 admonished tradesmen against the indiscriminate attitude:

> Arrack[8], tafia[9], rum, whiskey, gin &c. which navigators can easily procure in the countries where they are used, although apparently possessing the same properties as spirits of wine, are yet much inferior to it as preservatives. (Anonymous 1828: 161)

As a consequence of the inaccuracy of both tradesmen and taxidermists, unscrupulous manipulators started making up rare or fashionable animals. Stoate accounts for one of these ornithological scandals, which continued well into the early 20th century:

> George Bristow[10] carried out work similar to that of Hart[11] but was concerned almost exclusively with rarities which he stuffed for collectors or collected himself and sold to others. Bristow was not an exceptionally skilled taxidermist but he did seem to attract rarities and, in consequence, was eventually treated with considerable suspicion. (Stoate 1987: 13)

This and similar episodes show that, even in the modern epoch, there were no truthful tokens of many animals and plants from remote countries. 17th-century fauna collectors were no more accurate, and the first zoological gardens contained only the most common savage animals. Margaret T. Hodgen[12] recalls that the first British zoo, near the Tower of London, was comprised of six lions, one lean wolf, one tiger, and a porcupine (Hodgen 1964: 115). Thus, people's knowledge of 'monsters' fundamentally relied on words and images.

2. Representations of 'monsters'

The history of travel and that of the encounter with monstrous creatures are inseparable. From the very beginning of human travelling, indeed, strange animals and bizarre plants drew the attention of foreign visitors, who afterwards tried to communicate their experiences — and above all

7 It was outlawed in 1960.

8 A distilled alcoholic drink typically produced in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

9 Cheap rum made from sugarcane juice.

10 St Leonards-on-Sea, UK, 1863 – 14 April 1947. On George Bristow's fraud, see Harrison 1968.

11 Another famous taxidermist.

12 Woodland, CA, 1890 – San Marino, CA, 22 January 1977.

their surprise — through words, and sometimes also through pictures. Rudolf Wittkower's[13] essay "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters" is a classic on the topic (Wittkower 1977)[14]. Wittkower rapidly but densely surveys a long list of travelogues from Herodotus[15] on. Herodotus's reports on India, based in their turn on Hecataeus of Miletus's[16] ones and, before him, on those authored by Scylax of Caryanda's[17], inaugurated a crowded series of travelogue authors, which includes Ctesias of Cnidus[18], Megasthenes[19], Diodoros Siculus[20], Pliny the Elder[21], Arrian[22], Aelian[23], and Solinus[24]. These author mention pygmies, sciapodes or monopods, cynocephali, headless people with their faces placed between their shoulders, people with eight fingers and eight toes who have white hair until they are thirty, and from that age onwards turn black-haired, beings who have ears so large that they cover their arms to the elbows and their entire back, giants, men with very long tails, manticores[25], unicorns, griffins, and cocks, goats, and sheep of prodigious size (Wittkower 1977: 46).

Through Solinus's Collectanea rerum memorabilium [collection of memorable things] in the 3rd century CE, Macrobius[26] and Martianus Capella[27] in the 5th, and Isidore of Seville[28] in the 7th, this rich imaginary was handed down to medieval authors. Wittkower lists encyclopedias from the 12th to the 15th century and world chronicles from the 13th century onwards. Wittkower's exploit of erudition is complemented by a parallel account of images of monsters, which extends over the same period. Nevertheless, no theoretical analysis arises from the exceptional work of the iconologist. Furthermore, Wittkower mentions 17th- and 18th-century representations of monsters only in passing:

> And their power [the power of the "marvels of the East"] of survival was such that they did not die altogether with the geographical discoveries and a better knowledge of the East, but lived on in pseudo-scientific dress right into the 17th and 18th century. (Wittkower 1977: 46)

This passage points out a characteristic feature of 17th-century travel literature, which lay at the watershed between the fabulous and farfetched texts of the Middle Ages and the rationalistic and scrupulous accounts of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, Galileo[29], Bacon[30], and Descartes[31] were the 17th-century epoch-making heroes of a new episteme, which Michel Foucault[32] described as characterized by a different conception of the representational power of words (Foucault 1966). On the other hand, the 17th century differed from the Enlightenment as regards the way in which people, and especially travellers, would employ

13 Berlin, 22 June 1901 – New York, 11 October 1971.
14 For an update, see Friedman 1981.
15 Halicarnassus, Caria, Asia Minor, c. 484 BCE - Thurii, Calabria or Pella, Macedon, c. 425 BCE.
16 550 BCE – c. 476 BCE.
17 6th and early 5th century BCE
18 Cnidus, Asia Minor, c. 440 BCE – after 397 BCE.
19 Asia Minor, Ca. 350 – 290 BCE.
20 Agyrium, Sicily, c. 49 BCE.
21 Comum (Como), Italy, Roman Empire, 23 CE – Stabiae, Campania, Roman Empire, 25 August 79
22 Arrian of Nicomedia (Greece, c. 86/89 CE – c. after 146/160 CE).
23 Prenestae, current Palestrina, Italy, c. 175 CE – c. 235 CE.
24 Gaius Iulius Solinus, 3rd century CE.
25 Monstrous being with the body of a red lion and a human head with three rows of sharp teeth, sometimes bat-like wings, and a trumpet-like voice.
26 Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius; active in the 5th century; c. 390 CE – c. 430 CE.
27 Martianus Mineus Felix Capella; Madaura, Numidia, active between the 4th century and the 5th century.
28 Cartagena, Spain, c. 560 - Seville, Spain, 4 April 636
29 Galileo Galilei, Pise, 15 February 1564 – Arcetri, 8 January 1642.
30 Francis Bacon; Strand, London, 22 January 1561 - Highgate, Middlesex, 9 April 1626.
31 La Haye en Touraine, 31 March 1596 - Stockholm, 11 February 1650
32 Poitiers, 15 October 1926 – Paris, 25 June 1984.

this linguistic power. Friedrich Wolfzettel underlines the distinction between the two attitudes:

> It suffices to insist on the fact that pre-classical and classical rationalism are 'stable', enrooted in a relatively fixed system of values and tied to a hierarchical and concentric view of the universe. That will no longer be the case in the Enlightenment, which, as the world is increasingly subjected to historical investigation, discovers relativity and eventually attain — virtually — a decentered conception of the universe33.

In other terms, 17th-century travelogues still tried to depict, as the 16th-century ones would, a coherent universe, but now a novel scientific attitude, or rather a novel scientific rhetoric, would accompany such attempt. As Wolfzettel points it out:

> That which often strikes one in 17th-century exploration tales is the more or less clumsy attempt at naming things, at giving them a name, and at relating the unknown with the known. On the contrary, that which is at stake now is to edify a vast system of values, and to attribute to everything a precise place within it[34].

Therefore, 17th-century travelogues are interesting to the semiotician for they magnify a central epistemological problem: how do people try to relate what they know with what they do not know? What is the difference between symbols, icons, and indexes[35] when they are used for this purpose, i.e., for mediating between one's cultural background and an unknown reality? Monsters and strange creatures prompt this kind of questions. As soon as a monster or an anomalous plant is encountered, people start working as semiotic laboratories. Thus, Umberto Eco, for example, in his last major semiotic work about Peircian semiosis (Eco 1997), studied early accounts of the platypus in order to enlighten the way epistemological categories work[36].

3. Traveling curiosity

In order to answer the abovementioned semiotic questions, the present essay will be specifically concerned with the analysis of a 17th-century collection of travelogues, the Relation de divers voyages curieux [report on several curious voyages], edited by Melchisédech Thévenot[37]. Published in Paris in four volumes in-folio in 1663, this monumental work soon became a best seller. A new edition of it, enlarged and improved, was published in 1696. The 45th volume of the Nouvelle Biographie Générale contains a detailed entry about Melchisédech Thévenot's life:

> French traveler, he was born in Paris around 1620 and died in Issy, near Paris, on 29 October 1692. Since his youth, he was passionately interested in studying

33 "Il suffit d'insister sur le fait que le rationalisme préclassique et classique est un rationalisme 'stable' enraciné dans un système de valeurs relativement fixe et lié à une vision hiérarchique et concentrique de l'univers. Il n'en sera plus ainsi dans les Lumières qui, au fur et à mesure que le monde sera livré à une investigation historique, découvriront la relativité et aboutiront — virtuellement — à une conception décentrée de l'univers" (Wolfzettel 1996: 122); unless specified, English translations are mine; unless differently specified, emphasis is in the original text of the quotation.

34 "Ce qui frappe souvent, dans les récits d'exploration du XVIème siècle, c'est la tentative plus au moins maladroite de nommer les choses, de leur donner un nom et de relier l'inconnu au connu. Désormais, par contre, il s'agit d'édifier un vaste système de valeurs et d'assigner à chaque chose sa place précise à l'intérieur de celui-ci" (Ibidem: 124).

35 The three kinds of signs in Peirce's tripartire semiotic categorization.

36 However, he does not systematically compare images and words, since he is primarily interested in the general process of semiosis.

37 Paris, 1620 - Issy-les-Moulineaux, 29 October 1692.

> and in voyages; he never went outside of Europe, [but] his knowledge of Oriental languages, his conversations with those who had led distant explorations, their reports, which he acquired and translated into French, and his familiarity with mathematics, geography, and history, enabled him to pay a great service to his epoch, through collecting previous documents on distant lands and mainly on the East[38].

Another interesting detail in Thévenot's life is noteworthy: in 1696 he published in Paris L'Art de nager démontré par figures, which shows how important images were becoming, also for pedagogic purposes, in the 17th century (Thévenot 1696). The Relation de divers voyages curieux, in the same way, displays a spectacular amount of maps and engravings. Indeed, this anthology of travel accounts mainly collects 16th-century texts, but places them within a typical 17th-century editorial frame. In it. the first element that catches the analyst's attention is the title itself: the logic guiding the anthologist's selection is, evidently, that of curiosity[39]. Nevertheless, Melchisédech Thévenot's preface to the book emphasizes the utilitarian philosophy underlying his choice:

> I curiously searched for everything that could cast light on unknown lands up to the present time: and as regards natural history, I collected with equal care the new discoveries of plants, animals, minerals, and their properties, which can be somehow useful to us[40].

Wolfzettel stresses how the paradoxical and ambiguous mixture of curiosity and utilitarianism was fundamental in all 17th-century travel literature:

> At first sight, the truthful goal of the voyage consists, therefore, in a survey. That is not the only purpose, though, for if the usefulness of travel plays the role of a topos, independently from the issue of the genre of travel — commercial, archeological, Christian mission, embassy, etc. — one remarks nonetheless an intense valorization of the theme of curiosity[41].

This ambiguity is connected with the watershed nature of the 17th-century episteme, and is reflected in the way words and images appear in Thévenot's work. A section of his anthology reproduces and translates into French part of a Greek manuscript, a copy of Cosmas's [42]Topographia Christiana (6th century) (Thévenot 1663, 1: 31 et seq.). Neil Rennie (1995) describes the historical context of this work:

> Cosmas, a sixth-century Alexandrian who had been a merchant and had tra-

38 "Voyageur français, né vers 1620, à Paris, mort le 29 octobre 1692, à Issy près de Paris. Il eut dès sa jeunesse la passion de l'étude et des voyages ; il ne s'en alla pas au-delà de l'Europe, sa connaissance des langues orientales, ses conversations avec les hommes qui avaient étendu au loin leurs explorations, les mémoires qu'il acquit d'eux et qu'il traduisit en français, les connaissances qu'il possédait en mathématiques, en géographie et en histoire, le mirent à même de rendre un grand service à son époque, en réunissant des documents précieux sur les pays lointains et principalement sur l'Orient" (Hoefer 1853-66, vol. 24, n. 45-6 ("Teste-Zyll"), 1866: 125-6).

39 See Hodgen 1964: 111 and Arnold 1996: 263-86.

40 "J'ay recherché curieusement tout ce qui pouvoit donner lumiere des Pays inconnus jusqu'à cette heure: & pour l'histoire naturelle, j'ay ramassé avec le mesme soin, les nouuelles découuertes des Plantes, d'Animaux, de Minéraux, & de leurs propriétez, qui nous peuvent estre de quelque usage" (Thévenot 1663: ij).

41 "A première vue, le véritable but du voyage consiste ainsi en une mise au point. Pas uniquement, cependant, car si l'utilité des voyages occupe le rang d'un topos, indépendamment de la question du genre de voyage — commercial, archéologique, mission chrétienne, ambassade, etc. — on n'en constate pas moins une valorisation intense du thème de la curiosité" (Wolfzettel 1996: 126).

42 Cosmas Indicopleustes, 6th-century Byzantine geographer

> veled widely, made it the object of his Topographia Christiana to refute pagan geography, which he did from the evidence of the Bible. (Rennie 1995: 11)

In the manuscript that Thévenot included in his anthology, Cosmas describes a monstrous animal, a concoction of pig and deer. The editorial frame of the passage calls for a detailed analysis. First, in introducing the text, Thévenot wants to justify its insertion, hence he offers taxidermic evidence for it:

> The Greek fragment of Cosmas comes from Monsieur Bigot, who copied it in the Library of Florence, it is very short; however, it gives us [information about] the truthful cause of the Nile's flood, the description of the animal from which musk is extracted, and of another animal that would have looked like a monster or a chimera, had a head of it not been found in the cabinet of the late Monseigneur the Duke of Orleans, a head that is currently in the Louvre; we had its figure engraved life-size, to be included in a volume that will bear on its description[43].

Second, the image included in Cosma's description follows the rules of representation of a 17th-century zoological treatise: there is no indication of movement or landscape context. The posture of the animal shows all the relevant anatomic details, with no consideration for the normal relation between the parts of the body. Furthermore, the image is strictly associated with the caption, which has no realistic support within the image. In other terms, images in Thévenot's work show animals as if they were taxidermic specimens, exposed in a labeled glass box (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Depiction of a χοιρελάφος in Melchisédech Thévenot's *Relation de divers voyages curieux* (1663), 1: 2[44].

The semiotic story of this text is quite complex: i) Cosmas writes a description of what he has presumably seen (he might have reported other people's accounts, but that does not modify the semiotic structure of the chain, it only adds extra rings to it); ii) Melchisédec Thévenot identifies the animal described in Cosmas's verbal account with a specimen he had encountered before; and iii) he

43 "Le Fragment Grec de Cosmas vient de Monsieur Bigot, qui l'a copié dans la Bibliothèque de Florence, il est fort court; mais cependant, il nous donne la veritable cause de l'inondation du Nil, la description de l'Animal d'où vient le Musc, & d'un autre qui auroit passé pour un monstre ou pour une chimere, si l'on n'auoit trouué une teste dans le Cabinet de feu Monseigneur le Duc d'Orleans, qui est maintenant au Louvre, dont on a fait grauuer la figure aussi grande que la naturelle, pour la mettre dans un autre Volume où l'on aura sujet de la decrier" (Thévenot 1663: avis).

44 In the volume, page numbers restart at every new section. Unless specified, image reproductions are mine, from books in my personal library.

associates a visual representation of this specimen with Cosmas's verbal description. Thévenot, then, assumes a perfect transitivity between the natural world, words, and images. In the preface itself, indeed, he underlines the referential nature of engravings included in his anthology: "One will find in this collection figures that are all copied from the originals, and not due to the caprice of the engraver or the painter; such images would give a false idea of the thing, an idea that would not help elucidating the description."[45] From Barthes on, the rhetoric strategy that Thévenot adopts so as to give credibility to figures in his work is called *référentialisation*; Greimas and Courtés define it as follows:

> The problem at stake, when one wants to approach discourse from the generative point of view, is, therefore, not that of an a priori referent, but that of the referentialization of what is enunciated, which implies examining the procedures by which the referential illusion — the effect of meaning "reality" or "truth", as proposed by R. Barthes — is constituted[46].

Thévenot's anthology adheres to the patterns of representation in use in natural sciences so as to obtain a referentialization of imaginary animals' figures included in his work. In order to verify this hypothesis, it is worthwhile to compare Thévenot's engravings with those that one can find in a 17th-century 'scientific' treatise about the New World, for example the *Rerum Medicarum Novæ Hispaniæ Thesaurus seu Plantarum Animalium Mineralium Mexicanorum Historia ex Francisci Hernandez*[47], published in Rome in 1649 (Hernandez 1649). This lavishly illustrated in-folio contains an erudite zoological commentary by "Ioannes Terrentius Lynceus"[48], one of the greatest 17th-century naturalists. His text directly refers to pictures as if they were part of reality, as in the case of the image of the *"canis mexicana"*[49]. The acknowledgement of the existence of the monster, then, depends on the features of its depiction. The same naive word-image relation underpins the description of the ferocious *"lupus mexicanus"*[50]; or the commentary on the weird *"taurus mexicanus"*[51]. In the description of a calf with two heads, words pinpoint the anatomy of the monster, scientifically depicted as in a visual dissection. For every item of the amazing collection, the image precedes the verbal text, which refers to the engraving as to a sort of reality. That is the case also for the monstrous head found in the *"Principi Cæsij"* Museum. All these visual and indexical details construct such a persuasive effect of reality, that when the engraving of a *"Dracunculos Monoceros"* appears in the middle of a page, the reader is lead to believe in its existence.

Images work in the same way in Thévenot's anthology, through creating an illusion of authenticity. Most of them, indeed, are maps or visual nomenclatures, and the author consistently points

45 "Les Figures que l'on trouuera dans ce Recueil, sont toutes copiées sur des originaux, & non point tirées du caprice du Grauueur & du Peintre; car celles-là donnent plustost une fausse idée de la chose, qu'elle n'aidera en éclaircir la Descriptiõ" (ibidem).

46 "Le problème qui se pose, lorsqu'on veut aborder le discours du point de vue génératif, n'est donc pas celui du référent donné a priori, mais de la référentialisation de l'énoncé, qui implique l'examen des procédures par lesquelles l'illusion référentielle — l'effet de sens 'réalité' ou 'vérité' —, proposée par R. Barthes se trouve constituée" (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 312) ; unfortunately, I was not able to consult the English translation of this work, published in 1982. The translation is therefore mine.

47 Francisco Hernández de Toledo (La Puebla de Montalbán, Toledo, 1514 – Madrid, 28 January 1587) was a naturalist and court physician to the King of Spain; see Varey 2000.

48 Johann(es) Schreck, also Terrenz or Terrentius Constantiensis, Deng Yuhan Hanpo, Deng Zhen Lohan; 1576, Bingen, Baden-Württemberg or Constance – 11 May 1630, Beijing; see Zettl 2008.

49 "Animal hoc monstroso quodam corporis habitu, si probe in pictura figuram intueamur, apparet" (Hernandez 1649: 466).

50 "Animal hoc ex figura depicta ferocitatem toto Corporis habitu præsefert, & terrorem quendam ex visu spirat" (ibidem: 479).

51 "Terribilem Animalis huius Icon, & feri quidem Tauri alicuius speciem repræsentare videtur" (ibidem: 587).

out their veracity. In the *Voyage de Terri au Mogol*[52], for instance, one of the engravings shows this interesting label: "Portraits copied on the originals, executed by the Painter of the Mogul[53]" (Fig. 2).

AV MOGOL. 17

toute court, & font voir la crainte qu'ils en ont par leur tremblement. On donne à chacun de ces Elephants, quatre femelles ou femmes, comme ils les appellent dans le Pays.

La femelle porte son petit vn an auant que de le mettre bas. Ces animaux croissent jusques à trente ans, & viuent jusques à l'âge ordinaire d'vn homme.

§. III.

De la Religion des Indiens, & de leurs mœurs.

Portraits copiez sur les originaux faits par le Peintre du Mogol.

Sultan Caroune

Sa femme son Esclaue.

Le Grand Mogol Selim Sha.

LEs habitans de l'Inde estoient autrefois tous Idolâtres: mais depuis qu'ils furent subjuguez par Temur-lan, beaucoup de Mahometans se mêlerent parmy eux. On y trouue aussi des Persans, des Tartares, des Abyssins, & des Armeniens, & presque de toutes les autres Nations de l'Asie, & mesme de celles de l'Europe. L'on y voit des Iuifs qui sont si haïs, & sont en telle abomination, que leur nom passe pour vne injure dans le Pays. Quant à la taille des Indiens, ils ne sont pas fort differents des Europeens. Ils sont forts, & ie n'y ay point veu de bossus. Leur teint est oliuâtre. Ils ont les cheueux noirs comme gets, mais ils ne sont point frisez. On ne fait point de cas entre eux des femmes ny des hommes qui sont blancs, & qui passeroient pour beaux chez nous. Car cette blancheur que nous estimons, est parmy eux vne marque de la lepre qui y est assez commune. La plus part des Mahometans, si vous en exceptez les Prestres & les vieilles gens qui viuent dans la retraite, se rasent soigneusement le poil; ils laissent seulement croistre les mousstaches de la lévre d'en-haut. Ils ont aussi la teste toute rasé, ne laissant qu'vn petit toupet, par lequel ils espetent que Mahomet les prendra pour les mettre dans le Ciel. Le peuple se baigne souuent, & se frotte le corps auec des huiles. Il y a peu de difference entre l'habit des hommes & celuy des femmes, les vns & les autres sont faits de toile ou de drap de coton. Ils sont fort étroits vers la ceinture, & larges par en bas, descendans jusques à my-jambe. Mais la Figure fera bien mieux conceuoir cette sorte d'habillement, que la description que l'on en peut faire.

Fig. 2: Depiction of Indian costumes in Melchisédech Thévenot's *Relation de divers voyages curieux* (1663), 1: 17.

The commentary below stresses the importance of the image in relation to the verbal description: "However, the figure makes one conceive this sort of clothing better that the description can do it"[54]. The semiotic frame established by this kind of word-image relation moves the reader to consider with gullibility the following images too, like that of an unicorn-goat[55], or the engraving showing "two beggars who continue clashing their foreheads with all their strength until they faint, or until they are given something"[56], or even the image of people with conical heads. The credibility of such weird depictions derives from the general referential frame that images enjoy in Thévenot's anthology, which displays engravings as if they were taxidermic specimens.

4. The debate on iconicity

In the 1970s and in the 1980s, two alternative semiotic doctrines intensely debated about the problem of iconicity[57]. Franco-Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas[58] and his circle claimed that iconicity does not depend on the relation between images and reality, but rather on a simulation of reality, on a reality effect. This claim was formulated against Peirce's concept of icon:

> Following Charles S. Peirce, an icon is meant as a sign defined through its relation of resemblance with the "reality" of the external world, opposed to both the index (characterized by a relation of "na-

52 1590–1660; Thévenot translated Edward Terry's Voyage from Purchas 1625. Terry's text is in Foster 1921: 288-332. On Samuel Purchas (c. 1577 – c. 1626), see Hitchcock 2004.

53 "Portraits copiees sur les originauz faits par le Peintre du Mogol" (Thévenot 1663, 1: 17).

54 "Mais la Figure fera bien mieux conceuoir cette sorte d'habillement, que la description que l'on en peut faire" (Ibidem).

55 See the "Relation ou Iournal du Voyage de Bontekoe aux Indes Orientales", also contained in the first volume of Thévenot's collection (p. 5). Willem Ysbrandtszoon Bontekoe (Hoorn, 2 June 1587 – 1657) was a skipper in the Dutch East India Company (VOC), who made only one voyage for it (1618–1625) but became famous after publishing the journal of his adventures in 1646 under the title Journael ofte gedenckwaerdige beschrijvinge van de Oost-Indische reyse van Willem Ysbrantsz. Bontekoe van Hoorn, begrijpende veel wonderlijcke en gevaerlijcke saecken hem daer in wedervaren ("Journal or memorable description of the East Indian voyage of Willem Bontekoe from Hoorn, including many remarkable and dangerous things that happened to him there"); on Bontekoe's journal, see Bostoen et al. 1996 and Verhoeven and Verkruijsse 1996.

56 "Deux gueux qui se heurtent le front l'un contre l'autre, ce qu'ils continuent de toute leur force, iusques à ce qu'ils tombent evanoüis, ou qu'on leur donne quelque chose" (ibidem).

57 For a thorough examination, see Calabrese 1985: 120-39 and Polidoro 2012.

58 Tula, Russian Empire, 9 March 1917 – Paris, 27 February 1992.

> tural contiguity") and the symbol (based on mere social convention). If one considers — as we do it — that defining the sign in relation to that which it is not is not pertinent and that, on the other hand, semiotics does not become operational unless it situates its analyses at this or at that side of the sign, the proposed classification, while not being troubling, is not too interesting[59].

Greimas, then, liquidates Peirce's semiotics, and proposes to substitute the concept of icon with that of iconicity:

> This series of considerations leads us to introduce the term of iconization so as to designate, within the generative path of texts, the last stage of the figurativization of discourse, wherein we distinguish two phases: figuration itself, which accounts for the conversion of themes into figures, and iconization, which, taking charge of the already constituted figures, endows them with particularizing attributes, likely to produce the referential illusion[60].

Peircean semioticians, on the contrary, have been pointing out that language, including images, is not completely detached from its referent, and that people do not live in a huge semiotic and Greimasian simulation of reality without any contact with reality itself. In new semiotic terms, it was the old philosophical struggle between idealism and realism. A reflection on travels, monsters, and taxidermy can enlighten some neglected aspects of the controversy.

When travelers see 'strange things', for example 'monsters', they compare them with that which they already know. Thus, for instance, when the 18th-century Jesuit missionary Miguel del Barco[61] sees a siren, or what he things to be a siren, in the Historia natural y crónica de la antigua California (Barco 1973), he describes it after the classical model of a concoction between woman and fish:

> The strangest fish that was sometimes seen along this same coast, is that which is called woman fish or nereides. Victoriano Arnés[62], the missionary who established the new mission of Santa María[63], in one of his voyages found on the beach, at 31 degrees of latitude, one of these fishes, already dead and dry, and he described it with these words: "The fish looked like a woman from the waist up; and like a common fish from the waist down"[64].

Every verbal description of monsters or strange creatures uses similes in order to relate, through words, that which is known with that which was

59 "On entend par icône, à la suite de Ch. S. Peirce, un signe défini par sa relation de ressemblance avec la 'réalité' du monde extérieur, en l'opposant à la fois à indice (caractérisé par une relation de 'contiguïté naturelle') et à symbole (fondé sur la simple convention sociale). Si l'on considère -comme c'est notre cas- que la définition du signe par ce qu'il n'est pas est sémiotiquement non pertinente et que, d'autre part, la sémiotique ne devient opératoire que lorsqu'elle situe ses analyses en deçà ou au-delà du signe, la classification proposée, sans être gênante, n'offre que peu d'intérêt" (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 177).

60 "Cet ensemble de considérations nous amène à introduire le terme d'iconisation pour désigner, à l'intérieur du parcours génératif des textes, la dernière étape de la figurativisation du discours où nous distinguons deux phases: la figuration proprement dite qui rend compte de la conversion des thèmes en figures, et l'iconisation qui, prenant en charge les figures déjà constituées, les dote d'investissements particularisants, susceptibles de produire l'illusion référentielle" (ibidem).

61 Miguel del Barco González (Casas de Millán, 1706 – 1790); see Crosby 1994.

62 Graus, Aragón, 4 September 1736 – Rome, 8 June 1788. On Victoriano Arnés, see Bernabéu Albert 2008: 137-8 and n. 10

63 In 1766.

64 "El pez más raro, que en esta misma costa algunas veces se ha visto, es el que llaman pez mulier o nereides. El misionero de la nueva misión de Santa María, que era el padre, entonces, Victoriano Arnés, al tiempo de establecerla, en uno de sus viajes, halló en la playa, a los 31 grados de latitud, uno de estos peces ya muerto y seco: y le describió con estas palabras: 'El pez mulier tenía la figura de una mujer de medio cuerpo arriba; y de pescado común, de medio cuerpo abajo'" (quoted in Iturriaga de la Fuente 1992, 1: 102); the indication of the precise latitude of the discovery contributes to the referential effect of the description.

never seen before. Analogously, several names of monsters result from a verbal bricolage: "monocoli", "sciapodes", "cynocephali", "manticores", are words that reproduce in their structure the composite nature of the strange animals to which they refer[65]. Nevertheless, the way in which words represent reality (even in cases of effective iconization) is different from the way in which images do it. In another seminal essay, Rudolf Wittkower pointed it out that Marco Polo's descriptions of monsters relied on visual representations that he had seen in his native Medieval Venice (Wittkower 1957). However, the dependence of written accounts of monsters from images is not only historical but also semiotic: people are inclined to believe in monsters because they see pictures of them. In other terms, verbal representations do not have the same kind of existence that images have. Images, in a certain sense, are always real, as taxidermic specimens are, since their ontological status is such that their presence can never be totally denied. So as to provide a further example, let us consider this verbal description of a giant, from José Mariano Rotea's [66]Informe sobre gigantes:

> In San Borja (a mission established in 1762), a missionary had baptized a gentile child of gigantic height. And in order to permanently remember it, the missionary had hammered a nail in the wall at the spot reached by the neophyte's head. Such nail stayed at such height that the tallest men among us, whose height much exceeded the two yards of average height, barely could, raising their arm, succeed in touching the spot with their fingers. Accordingly, the height of the child was at least ten and a half palms [more than 2.20 meters], or little less than eleven palms, a height that in our times it is rarely seen in the world[67].

Let us compare, now, this verbal account with the image of a family of 'Patagonian giants', from the anonymous work *A Voyage Round the World in His Majesty's Ship the Dolphin* (Anonymous 1767: frontispice) (Fig. 3):

Fig. 3: "A Sailor giving a Patagonian Woman some Biscuit for her Child", from *A Voyage Round the World in His Majesty's Ship the Dolphin* (Anonymous 1767: frontispiece)

65 One could argue, as Greimas suggested it, that even a symbolic system, such as the verbal language predominantly is, shows, in certain circumstances, an iconic dimension.

66 José Mariano Rotea (Mexico City, 1732 – Bologna, 1799) was a Jesuit at San Ignacio (current Baja California Sur, Mexico) from 1759 until the Jesuits were expelled from New Spain in 1768. His account on the pre-historical inhabitants of the region was included by Miguel del Barco in his manuscript and then published in Italian by Francisco Xavier Clavijero (Puerto de Veracruz, New Spain, 9 September 1731 – Bologna, 2 April 1787) in Italy in 1780-1 (Clavijero 1780-81); on Rotea, see Laylander 2014; on Clavijero, see Maneiro and Gómez Fregoso 2004.

67 "En San Borja (misión fundada el año de 1762), bautizó su misionero a un gentil mozo de altura gigantesca. Y para memoria permanente de su altura, fijó el misionero en la pared un clavo en el sitio donde llegaba la cabeza del neófito. Este clavo quedó en tal elevación, que los hombres más altos entre nosotros y que excedían mucho las dos varas de estatura regular, apenas podían, levantando el brazo, llegar a tocarle con los dedos. Según esto, la altura de este mozo era por lo menos de diez palmos y medio [más de 2.20 metros], o que faltaría poco para llegar a once, ¡estatura que en nuestros tiempos rara vez se ve en el mundo!" (quoted in Iturriaga de la Fuente 1992, 1: 109).

In analyzing the relation between, on the one hand, giants and pygmies in travel literature and, on the other hand, those created by Swift, Neil Rennie points out the essential difference between visual and verbal texts: "But an anonymous account of Byron's voyage, which spoke moderately of men averaging 'about eight feet' (who had grown considerably in the illustrations), was 'undoubtedly genuine', the *Gentleman's Magazine* decided [...]." (Rennie 1995: 78).

Images somehow 'create' monsters, but this 'creation' does not depend only on the reality effect provided by iconization (as Greimas suggested) or on the fact that the dimensions of monsters are increased in visual descriptions. Let us consider another example. In early travelogues, gorillas have often been depicted as monstrously hairy people. Once again, what was unknown was explained through conceptual and verbal *bricolage*, merging together people and exceptional hairiness. Thus, in Hanno's account of these animals, one reads: "There was an island having a lake, and in this lake another island, full of savage people, the greater part of whom were women, whose bodies were hairy, and whom our interpreters called Gorillae" (Cory 1828: 129)[68]. Let us practice the same exercise, and compare this verbal concoction with the visual one in the frontispiece of Willem Piso's[69] *Historia Naturalis Brasiliæ* (1648). One can see, just beside the title, the image of a monkey, whose *bricolage* structure corresponds exactly to that which underlies the verbal description: a very hairy man. Nevertheless, once again, the semiotic status of the visual *bricolage* differs from that of the verbal concoction (Fig. 4). The concluding paragraphs of the essay will be devoted to pinpointing such difference.

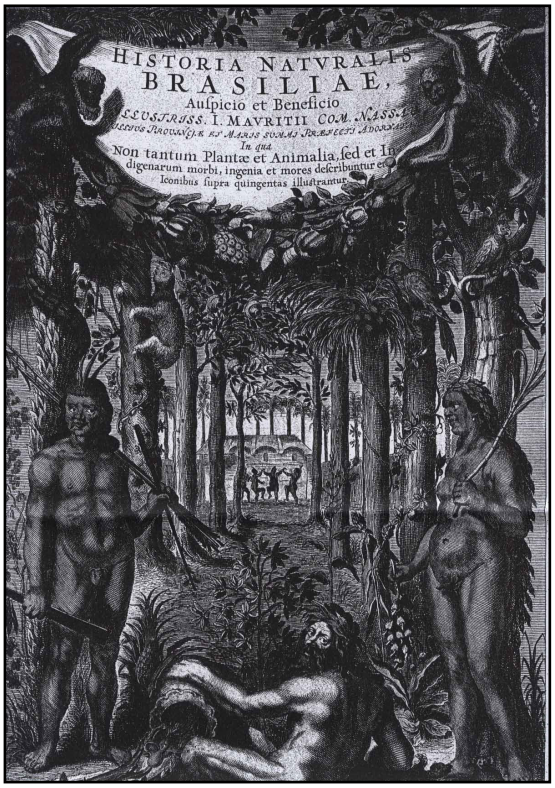

Fig. 4: Frontispice of Willem Piso's Historia Naturalis Brasiliæ (1648)

5. Conclusion

People believe more in monstrous images than they do in monstrous verbal accounts. Furthermore, they believe more in monstrous taxidermic specimens than in monstrous images. In Peircian terms, monstrous icons are more credible than monstrous symbols, and less than monstrous indexes. That does not depend only on a reality effect, but also on the semiotic rules that preside over the genesis of these different kinds of signs. Within an indexical semiotic system of signs such as taxidermy, there are more limits to the creation of farfetched monsters than in an iconic one, and even more than in a symbolic system. One can ut-

68 Hanno the Navigator was a Carthaginian explorer of the sixth or fifth century BCE; see Blomqvist 1979.

69 Willem Pies (in Latin Guilielmus Piso, also called Guilherme Piso in Portuguese); Leiden, 1611 – Amsterdam, November 28, 1678; a Dutch physician and naturalist, he participated as doctor in an expedition to Dutch Brazil from 1637 to 1644; on Piso, see Pies 2004.

ter Quine's[70] "squared circle" — which is a symbolic monster — but one cannot made up an image of it, and even less can one produce, like in Chinese shadow-theatre, the shadow that this monstrous object would cast. That is the semiotic reason for which the tradition of monsters, over many centuries, has relied more on images than on words. Eco's definition of semiotics, as the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie (Eco 1975: 18), is certainly true, but different signs lie in different ways. And people believe more in signs which, semiotically, are bound to lie less.

Furthermore, people believe in monstrous images because images are, in a way, always affirmative. In the same way, taxidermic specimens cannot deny their own existence. Both images and taxidermic monsters can be fake, but negation is a peculiarity of symbolic systems of signs only (Ginzburg 1998). Magritte's pipe cannot deny its own existence. A verbal utterance must do it. As a conclusion, monstrous images in 17th-century travel literature exert an effect of reality because of the scientific frame in which they are displayed, but that is not the only (Greimasian) reason for their apparent credibility. Indeed, beside the contextual effect, which is peculiar to the particular historical period (the watershed between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment), other (Peircean) reasons attribute credibility to images, and relate to the way in which people use images instead of words in order to understand the unknown.

Studying the early modern rhetoric of credibility and its semiotics is relevant not only historically. The semiotic logic connected with the creation of monsters has not completely disappeared with modernity or post-modernity. People still believe in images of something that nobody has ever come across directly. More and more zoologists, for example, are keen on giving scientific credibility to cryptozoology. The founder of this discipline defined it as "the scientific study of animal forms, the existence of which is based only on testimonial or circumstantial evidence, or on material proof judged insufficient by some" (Heuvelmans 1995: XXV).

The 17th-century attitude towards images of monsters, however, shares a common background not only with modern cryptozoology, but also with every form of belief based on both the rhetoric of veridiction and referentiality (Greimas) and the intrinsic semiotic nature of images (Peirce). More and more, social networks present us with bizarre images coming from all over the world. Media professionals then single out and extract some of them, frame them in a referentializing context, and give them the status of 'truthful depiction of reality'. That is how early modern travelogue writers would 'create' both their monsters and popular belief in them. That is how, still nowadays, media create their own monstrous visual news, passing it off as unbiased representation of reality. In both cases, the vigilance of semioticians is urgent.

70 Willard Van Orman Quine; Akron, OH, 25 June 1908 - Boston, MA, 25 December 2000.

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