

The Amazon, Representation and Media

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Abstract

This article is aimed at discussing the role of the media in the construction of the image of the Amazon. The effective occupation of the Amazon began chiefly as from the 1970s as a result of the advance of the cattle farming boundary and the development of scientific techniques and knowledge. During this period, there was a growth in the presence of Amazon-related issue in the media, fostering an increase in the attention given to environmental concerns in the national and global scenario. It is important to outline that, even today, the media continues to represent the Amazon chiefly with a vision that is mythological and exotic by nature. This construction of the Amazon's image is continuous and has an impact on the formation of views regarding what the Amazon actually is. The environmental theme, based on myths, is inserted within almost all the sectors of the media when the Amazon is in focus, which jeopardizes the visibility of human groups that inhabit this immense region.

Key words: Amazon. Media. Representation. Landscape. Myth.

1. Introduction

This article aims to discuss the media's depiction of the Amazon Rainforest, as well as its landscape and how it is perceived according to different contemporary theorists. Perceptions of the Amazon are highly complex and contradictory. It has recently become especially synonymous with biodiversity, and can be defined as "the world's largest biodiversity reserve and one of its greatest mineral resources" (FERREIRA & SALATI, 2005, p. 25). At times it is remembered for advancing deforestation or conservation policies, the culture of tribes living in the Forest or of people inhabiting its cities. According to Gonçalves (2001), the images the region's inhabitants have of the Amazon are varied, since they take on different socioecological and cultural meanings that are specific to these people's daily lives. By contrast, outsiders have a more uniform and singular view of a vast, dense tropical forest of incalculable riches and few inhabitants. In this respect, over time different non-Amazonian (national and international) economic and political players have left their mark on the region and remained recorded in the landscape.

2. The Amazon viewed "from the outside"

According to Cosgrove (1998), players in the dominant culture use different scientific and technical instruments to create landscapes in accordance with their own notion of the world's reality and impose this image on others as the general reality. In this case, despite their significant cultural heritage, the alternative culture of Amazonians only marginally influences the Amazon region. The Amazon Jungle has been an increasingly prominent feature in the media in recent decades, especially from the 1970s onwards, when major development projects were implemented in the region. In addition, concern over environmental issues also gained greater visibility on both the national and world stage. In this respect, given the instant availability of information in our technical, scientific and informational age (SANTOS, 1999), the media has ensured greater dissemination of representations of the Amazon landscape. According to Tuan (1980), the natural environment and world view are closely linked. When not derived from an alien culture, a world view is made up of social and physical elements of the local environment. In the author's view, in non-technological societies the physical environment is still the boundary and content of social and cultural foundations, that is, the way of life.

As such, it is a boundary for world view. Tuan cites the Mbuti Pygmies from Congo's equatorial forest as an example of this relationship between man, nature and perception. As a human habitat, the main difference in the equatorial forest environment is in its all-encompassing nature. There is no difference between the sky and the earth, no horizon or easily recognizable visual landmark; there is no clearly isolated tree like the lone baobab on the plains of the Kalahari or far-reaching views. Nowadays, this type of world view limited to the natural environment is rare, since the world is dominated by technology and the media. Although the Amazon region is an isolated area, most of its population has access to information. As pointed out by Lévy (2001), new connectivity-based media formats have ensured the planarization of global populations. This general interconnection ensures greater density, the distribution of transport and communication networks, a decrease in space, greater proximity of the human race and more prospects of interaction in the Amazon region. Despite its centuries-old complexity and belied by the seasonal perspective, the abundant landscape of the rainforest gives the impression of uniformity. In spite of their contact with contemporary reality, the forest environment has a decisive effect on places where the landscapes remain relatively unaltered. Tuan remarks that "the most intense esthetic experiences of nature are likely to take one by surprise. Beauty is felt as aspect of reality that one has not known before; it is the antithesis of the acquired taste for certain landscapes or the warm feeling for places one knows well" (TUAN, 1980, p. 108). The lifestyle and layout of Amazonian city landscapes are determined by the (Amazon) River. This means that several sites have a similar identity despite the individual peculiarities of each one.

However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that each place retains highly individual characteristics, very different from idealizations. In modern times, access to the environment is increasingly indirect and limited to special occasions. This is due to urbanization and the transformation of nature. The author also points out that technology's influence on the human lifestyle has further restricted contact with the natural world and limited it to recreational situations (TUAN, 1980). To Tuan (1980), the term topophilia refers to the affective bond between people and place, which often denotes closer contact with nature, even when it is already assimilated by space. In the author's opinion, it is important to examine the role of environments or settings in creating images of topophilia, since this sentiment involves emotional ties. However, although these images are taken from the environment, this does not mean it is the direct cause of topophilia. Certain settings awaken so-called topophilic sentiments, although this always depends simultaneously on the observer. According to Tuan, "Sensory stimuli are potentially infinite: that which we choose to attend (value or love) is an accident of individual temperament, purpose, and of the cultural forces at work at a particular time (TUAN, 1980, p. 120).

In some cases, this sentiment can lead to promotional phrases such as "city nicknames", which are aimed exclusively at boosting the image of these places, considered an intangible asset. Civic pride and economic competition are often associated with the goal of creating labels for a city (nicknames or epithets), aimed at conveying the idea that it is special. According to the author, this boosterism "aims to create a favorable image and has little respect for complex truth. But to be effective the image must have some grounding in fact. A strong trait is made to stand for the whole personality (TUAN, 1980, p. 232, 236). How the Amazon region is currently viewed and perceived is still steeped in the concepts, judgments, symbols, myths and values of European civilization. It is through the narratives of European conquerors that images are perceived to this day. Ugarte explains that "These mental images were often converted into formal images, that is, prints made by specialists that illustrated serials, books and maps" (UGARTE, 2003, p. 4). According to Ugarte (2003), it was during the process of colonial conquest that the Amazon became one of the "margins" of the so-called New World. The author emphasizes that, unlike other places on the planet, such as the Mexico Valley or Central Andes, which went from being on the margin to the center of the colonial world, the Amazon is still considered marginal. The author points out that there was no effective occupation of this area during the fourteenth century.

In fact, because there were no established European colonies in the region, only scattered invasions occurred. To the author, when viewed in terms of a marginal situation, this assessment of the Amazon region is reminiscent of a colonial viewpoint. The author illustrates how the Amazon region was represented at the beginning of colonization, citing maps compiled by cartographers in which the Amazon River is depicted as a giant serpent. A map drawn up by Italian cartographer Sebastian Cabot in 1544 depicts five cities that did not exist: "[...] we see five cities that did not exist at the time (three on the left bank, and two on the right). Sebastian Cabot's depictions are based on what was reported by Orellana, in an analogy of the battle between the Spanish and the Amazonian people" (UGARTE, 2003, p. 15).

Another fourteenth century Amazon explorer who compiled a figurative map of the region was Diogo Homem. According to Ugarte (2003), Homem also compiled a map showing nonexistent cities. Moreover, the River Amazon is registered as a Freshwater Sea and scenes from everyday Amazon life, such as an indigenous gathering, appear in this symbolic representation. The Amazon River is one again depicted as a serpent. In a review of the views/representation of the most significant myths about the Amazon, Steinbrenner (2007) contextualizes that since the conquest of the so-called New World until the present day, the most enduring of these is Eldorado. This legend goes back to the colonization period and tells of a city made of solid gold and containing extraordinary treasures, which attracted sixteenth century travelers. In the nineteenth century the legend compelled naturalists to cross the ocean and venture into the Amazon Rainforest. The Eldorado myth subsequently resurfaced during the rubber boom through the mass migration from the Northeast in the late nineteenth century. Once again the myth is reworked in the form of mining and land possession in the 1970s and 1980s. Manuel Diegues Júnior¹ points out that given the marks left by the Portuguese and Christianity, the Amazon could be characterized as a Luso-Christian. The author remarks that the Amazon was designated as luso-tropical by sociologist Gilberto Freire, reconciling the fundamental ethnic (Portuguese) element and the geographic condition of the environment in which it spread. Portuguese exploration of the Amazon began in the seventeenth century, with colonizers encountering a landscape/natural setting different from the maritime region and inland areas of the Brazilian Northeast.

In these parts, the dominant elements are the rainforest and water. The author emphasizes the divergent impressions of some explorers at the time about the Amazon. Effective occupation of the Amazon took place primarily from the 1970s as a result of the advance of the agricultural frontier, the development of techniques and scientific knowledge. Since the time that Manuel Diegues Júnior's book was written in the early 1960s, many of the myths about the occupation of the Amazon have remained. Studies on the landscape of cities along the Amazon River are typically compiled based on descriptions. The author points out that these descriptions are elaborated from approaching boats, providing a true picture whose border is between the river and the sky, surrounded by dark green vegetation. The layout of these cities typically features a main road that runs parallel to the river and contains the main urban equipment. At the same time as it established a boundary, the river is also part of the city. At the confluence of the river and the city is the riverbank, a vital area for inhabitants and a gateway for arrivals and departures, trade and social interaction. "On the riverbank and radiating from it are a seemingly chaotic set of spatial/geographic objects such as warehouses, stores, ports, markets, wharfs and boats, these last in a variety of shapes and sizes" (TRINDADE JÚNIOR, SILVA, LÉVY, 2008, p. 35-36).

The most common equipment in these cities is generally the city hall, churches, city council, schools, health clinics and markets. These are either located on the main road or nearby. It is important to underscore that there is generally a church located in a central square facing the river, a common occurrence in other Brazilian landscapes. Phone company antennas are another element incorporated given the insertion of these cities in the advancing technical networks resulting from capitalism. Given the distances involved and the road situation, cars are not a common feature. The most common forms of transport are motorcycles and bicycles. Motorcycle taxis circulate on the generally dirt roads, a service unique to the region and highly dependent on the Amazon climate, both in summer and winter (TRINDADE JÚNIOR, SILVA, LÉVY, 2008, p. 36). According to Gonçalves (2001), although the Amazon is now a fundamentally urban region its image has always been linked to the forest, rivers, violence and deforestation. As demonstrated by the IBGE's 2000 Census, more than 70% of the area's inhabitants already reside in cities. This urbanization is the result of the agricultural model of colonization in the 1970s, managed by the central government, and an enclave economy that attracted many but employed few. In this respect, it is important to note the significance of the two Amazon cities: Belém and Manaus. With regard to the urbanization of Manaus, Ab'Sáber's book "*Amazônia do Discurso à Práxis*" (The Amazon from Discourse to Praxis) characterizes the importance of its strategic location close to the banks of the Rio Negro.

¹ Humanist Manuel Diegues Júnior: born in Maceió, Alagoas state, where he attended elementary and high school before going on to secure a Bachelor's Degree in Legal and Social Sciences from the Recife Law School. While studying law in Recife he studied Sociology and Cultural Anthropology alongside Gilberto Freyre. He has also served in public office in a number of roles, as well as Program Director for the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Brazil and as a professor of Cultural Anthropology and Brazilian Ethnography at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro) (DIEGUES JÚNIOR, 1960, p. 4).

It can be said that imagery of the Amazon landscape is still permeated by reports and descriptions from the European colonization period. The region is an essentially plural space and land changes/occupation are known to have occurred primarily from the 1970s onwards; however, there are elements and marks (indigenous people, vegetation, the city of Manaus, water, etc.) that retain traits dating to before more pronounced occupation. Image is a representation of reality that makes absence more present. It imposes itself in place of what is real, representing something and putting itself in the place of that same thing. Representation of the Amazon landscape is a phenomenon that ensures the region's presence in many images: forests, indigenous people, biodiversity, rivers. The presence of this universe is perceived based on discourse that puts its image in place of the landscape itself. Roger Chartier's book "On the Edge of the Cliff" contains a concept that serves as the basis for debate on representation of the Amazon. An idealized form of this theme is constantly in the media, focusing consistently on the natural environment and its destruction, biodiversity and so-called traditional populations. Few people in Brazil and the world have effective knowledge of this reality. Representations symbolize something; they are reflexive dimensions that can be both denunciative transparencies and preconceptions. Many of the representations that the media continues to (negatively and incompletely) perpetuate exemplify denunciative transparency: lungs of the world, exotic place, exploration potential, and no civilization, among others; which brings us to the following formulation: "One of the most practically applicable models for exploring how modern representation - be it linguistic or visual - functions is one that takes into consideration the system's dual dimensions: a dimension of "transitivity" or denunciative transparency, in which each representation *represents* something, and a dimension of reflexivity or enunciative opacity, in which each representation *presents itself as* representing something" (CHARTIER apud MARIN, 1989, p.166-67). Denunciative transparency is imbued with ideological, cultural and political structures. The media creates a certain interpretation of the landscape; however, this does not mean that different means of creating and interpreting local landscapes cannot exist and interact in opposition with each other.

There is an Amazon different from the outside images constructed and, at the same time, an "exotic" Amazon persists that whets the appetite of the world and the media for "paradises on earth". Television plays a vital role in this media landscape, due to its reach and technical resources, which often turns reality into a visual spectacle. Dutra (2009) notes that television programs focusing on the Amazon continue to portray it as a region frozen in time with abundant natural resources, but inhabited by local populations incapable of managing these resources and ensuring economic rationality. Exogenous media continues to produce representations of the region whereby local populations are portrayed as "different and exotic, and it is only due to these preconceived notions that it features frequently in the media". The author points out that this "exoticism" occurs because their language is different from that of media producers and the media's hegemonic discourse perceives them as "groups of people frozen in time, beings that are alien to the modern world" (DUTRA, 2009, p. 23). Moreover, a fragmented form of the exoticism conceived during the colonization period is still present in television programs through multifaceted discourse on the meanings of ecology as well as generalized and stereotypical views of the region. These designations often demonstrate extension: The Classic Amazon, Legal Amazon and International Amazon. This type of view tends to be uniform, simplifying complex realities. Dutra emphasizes the existence of various views on the Amazon, which involve multiple agents and different scales.

According to Bueno (2002), some of the expressions linked to initial contact with the Amazon have reemerged, gaining new meanings. "Eldorado" and "Paradise" are two of these. The former is associated with the pioneering economic activities in the Amazon in the 1960s and 70s when the region reentered the national stage after decades of ostracism. The notion of Paradise refers to alternative tourist activities in locations different from mainstream tourist sites and where nature is seemingly untouched. This causes saturation since, although vast areas have been inserted into the national dynamic, there are many others still almost unspoiled, both in terms of occupation and knowledge. Current media discourse on the Amazon follows two main approach, namely that of population deficit and abundant natural resources. In questioning why the Amazon region is so important to Brazil and the world, Dutra notes that the greater the scientific progress in terms of its biodiversity and practical scientific uses, the greater "the number and complexity of animal and plant species and ecosystems relevant not only to the future of Brazil, but of the planet as a whole" (DUTRA, 2009, p. 157). The technical and scientific future of humanity is intertwined with the Amazon.

Dutra (2009) points out that, in light of its biodiversity, the Amazon is no longer a stock of available resources, but vital to the maintenance of humanity, either in terms of the planet's ecological balance or the use of its natural resources for various purposes.

He emphasizes that this shift in media discourse includes elements of other scientific fields, such as economy, politics, geopolitics, internal and international relations. Despite the existing knowledge and scientific research conducted on the Amazon, a sense of homogeneity regarding its landscape still prevails. This is the result of the descriptions of naturalists such as La Condamine, Spix and Martius, Euclides da Cunha and Alberto Rangel, despite the fact that “when describing their impressions from the rivers, closer inspection would have revealed to travelers that this uniformity is merely a first impression” (BUENO, 2002). According to Bueno (2002), scientific knowledge from a geographical standpoint became a feature of representations of the Brazilian Amazon in the early 20th century. This is the result of integrationist policies for the region that began with the Vargas government and the creation of the Brazilian Institute of Statistics and geography, and continued under Juscelino Kubitschek and military regimes.

As such, geography plays an important role in not only the organization of knowledge about the Amazon, but primarily in compiling official discourse that will determine how Brazilians view the region. In school curricula, particularly geography, the government is also responsible for establishing official views. The author notes that interest in the Amazon varies according to government periods and interests, always from an economic and geopolitical standpoint. Developmental policies for the region proposed by the Brazilian government in the 1950s heightened media interest in the area. Under military rule in the 1960s, this region of Brazil became significant in terms of national security and geopolitical practices. Public policy governing the occupation, protection and development of the region are key. The delimitation of the (Legal) Amazon (1966) and the creation of the Superintendent for the development of the Amazon (SUDAM) supported investment in the region. These government policies were accompanied by official propaganda and media coverage depicted the region as the last frontier to be conquered by Brazil. Images of the forest being cleared, large mining projects and colonization by Brazilians from other areas were portrayed as synonymous with development. The exogenous view dominates media reports from the period.

A survey conducted by Bueno (2002) of front page news stories or special reports by *Veja* magazine (one of Brazil's most important publications) from 1970 to 2000 found that discourse on the Amazon focuses primarily on the natural environment, indigenous populations and the destruction of the biome. When the region's population is addressed, indigenous people are viewed stereotypically. During the 1980s, environmental aspects became an important feature in the media. Nature conservation and the protection of indigenous people placed the Amazon back on the agenda. The media, through its various channels, has the power to create and reflect society's different views. These images create a fictional representation based on generalizations. The author ponders whether the mass broadcasting of these images contributes to knowledge of the region and its issues. Similar images are often accompanied by text, where the content varies in accordance with environmental interests (BUENO, 2002, p. 139). According to Steinbrenner (2007), the production of knowledge on the Amazon has always been linked to the construction of myths that at times reveal its reality, and at other times conceal several realities. The author highlights the use of myths to describe the area as a simplifying and strategic tool based on an external view, which ultimately addresses the use of resources. Discursive fields involving science, politics and the media vie for the representation and production of meaning regarding the Amazon.

The common viewpoint produced by these three discursive fields prioritizes the environmental issue, often forgetting individuals. It also disregards the fact that most of the region's 22 million inhabitants live in and suffer the hardships of unplanned urbanization, while emphasizing that many Amazon cities have worse sanitation than most African countries. For Steinbrenner (2007), it can be said that the urban Amazon is omitted in representations. How can one reveal an Amazon that goes beyond myth, eliminating the superficial interpretations of common sense and building a new, more multifaceted and realistic image of the region when the Amazon can be nature, countryside and city combined in different symbioses? In order for a more complex and realistic interpretation of the Amazon reality to emerge, Steinbrenner notes that media discourse framed by scientific fields must form a new social representation of the region. The environment is at the heart of social representation and the intense urbanization process is almost never depicted in images created by the media. Steinbrenner emphasizes that since the Amazon's emergence in the History of humanity, its description has been permeated by a mythical aura, both in writing and in images. The author points out that mythicizing the reality does not mean merely creating illusions about it, or that its creation is based exclusively on errors. Rather, it reduces the complexity of certain traits recognized as true in a sterile simplification process in that it eradicates diversity in the homogeneous image produced by the repetition of reductionist representations.

Sterility compiled through myth simplifies content and is therefore easily inserted into the popular imagination and difficult to overcome (STREINBRENNER, 2007, p. 6). The author notes that the 1990s saw the emergence of a new version of the myth associated with the planet's sustainability and preserving this sustainability. It is important to note that, in accordance with Becker (2004), globalization has led to an appreciation of nature as an asset that can be used in the present or kept in reserve for the future, and as a source of power for those able to decipher it through science.

3. Final Considerations

The media portrays the Amazon through a mythological and exotic view of nature. This image of the Amazon is highly efficient in that it is easily "understood" and ultimately influences other agencies involved in forming opinions about what the Amazon will become. As such, it can be said that the current environmental theme, based on myths, is present in almost all sectors of the media when the Amazon is the focus. For the media, the destruction/preservation of nature/biodiversity is still the ultimate brand/symbol of the Amazon. Although it represents much of what the Amazon is, this central environmental discourse ultimately dissociates from the social reality, since most of the region's population lives in largely rundown urban areas. The recent urbanization of the Amazon and its many social problems are not a prominent feature of the mosaic of representations. In conclusion, it can be said that the Brazilian media's portrayal of the Amazon does not provide detailed information on the realities of this vast area of Brazil, since the messages broadcast about the region focus on nature: the uniform landscape, paradise on earth, population deficit, a source of water, biodiversity and the lungs of the world. Construction of an imaginary representation continues to thrive. Communication channels broadcast news based on stereotypes that prioritize the natural environment over populations. Indeed, populations deemed as traditional are often represented as merely part of the landscape.

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