THE HERMENEUTICS OF SIGNS AND THE QUEST OF OTHERNESS IN LATIN AMERICA

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"What is now proved was once only imagin'd."
William Blake, "Proverbs of Hell"

After five hundred years in Western History, Latin American cultures have been rising basic questions regarding their "identity". This is an attempt to understand their present role by assuming their cultural tradition. In fact, this is not a new issue, but it now seems quite urgent in the context of a changing and challenging world. This work will examine what is behind this intellectual and cultural search and point to some critical conceptions of cultural identity. It will suggest the use of an integrative theoretical framework drawing upon diverse sources and disciplinary fields and concentrating upon a more open approach, in a similar way to Michel Serres, the French philosopher who explores the role of rationality in informational interchanges, as summarized by Harary and Bell (Serres, 1982).

> From this point of view, philosophical truth consists in seeing that the universality of a model is not probable. What is evident, is the cohabitation of different systems of thought (hence of multiple models and truths), which form any number of unique discourses, each justified by a set of chosen coordinates and by underlying presuppositions. Rigor and coherence are regional. Thus, universality and the global can only be conceived in a model that recognizes the predominance of regionality and the local (p. xiv).

In looking at modern Latin American cities and urban cultures, Néstor García Canclini echoed Serres' project:

> Social sciences contribute with their different observational perspectives to the difficulties of looking (at urban cultures). Anthropologists came into the city by foot, sociologists drove in on the highway and communication experts arrived by plane. Each one of them registered what they are able to do, and then built a different and partial vision. There is a fourth perspective, that of the historian which cannot be obtained coming into the city, but upon leaving it, moving from its historical center toward its contemporary borders. But the contemporary city center is not yet in the past (1989, p. 16).

This approach may very ell move the traditional tensions between disciplin-

Notions of { difference / identity }

Others

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Prodanov.
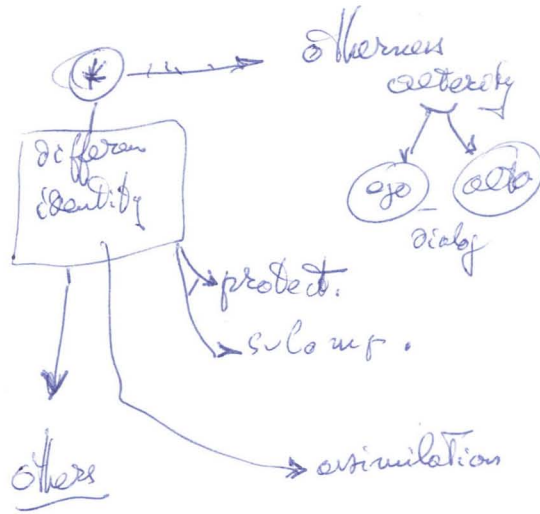
is not enough. Study the field
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ary fields into a dialogical relationship, close to the vitality of cultures themselves. *← los hombres —*

FROM IDENTITY TO OTHERNESS

T. Todorov and the Emergence of a Semiotic of Otherness

The range of the question on Latin American identity is overwhelming not only in the terms of authors, but of the vastness of its time frame. Beginning from the very pages of Columbus' journal it is possible to trace the confrontation between the Western Christian self-conception and the emergence of other beings at the edge of the definition of mankind. The Admiral could only compare the natives in order to represent them: "They are of the color of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor white" (11/10/14-92). "They are whiter than those of other islands. Among others, he had seen two wenches as white as they might be in Spain" (13/12/1492). But, in spite of this chromatic variation, "They all go naked, men and women, as the day they were born" (6/11/1492). This last fact, nakedness, as Todorov (1984) remarks, symbolizes not another culture but the lack of culture as established in the Biblical tradition: insofar as they do not wear cloths they are savages.

This first recorded Western vision of native American cultures brings us to our first theoretic point of reference, the seminal work of Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (1984), which directs our attention to the relationship between the topics of otherness (the conception of alterity) and of semiotic behavior (both in the reception and production of symbols) which takes place in facing otherness. Taking Todorov's view as point of departure, we can build a bipolar scale which gives an account of the encounter and of the different positions which cultures could assume in this event. At one extreme similarity prevails: the other culture is regarded as one's equal and hence as like oneself, as did Las Casas. In this case, the other's identity is denied, either at the level of existence or at that of cultural practices. Here subjection and assimilation of the Indians both reflect the same consideration, that of the Other-as-object (as in Columbus' first descriptions of the landscape and resources of the islands). Progressively Todorov's analysis moves through chance and unconscious forms of cultural dialogue (as in Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán). Finally, the analysis comes to the other-as-subject, which is alike but unlike me, thereby rendering each of us exterior and capable of dialogue. This is the opposite pole, that of otherness, and, as Todorov points out, there is "an infinity of intermediary nuances" between those two extremes.

Thus, the possibility of the emergence of otherness is founded not in radical otherness which could guide cultures to indifference or to irrational panic, but in a shared field where similarity and dissimilarity begin to dialogue." We can live our lives without ever achieving full discovery of the other--supposing that such discovery is possible. Each of us, in turn, begins

the process over again, fo the previous experiments do not relieve us of out proper responsibility, though they can teach us the effects of misreading the facts. Yet even if the discovery of the other must be assumed by each individual and eternally recommenced, it also has a history and forms that are socially and culturally determined" (Todorov, 1984, p. 247). These cultural and social determinations can be at three levels according to their historical emergence: (1) an axiological or valuational level according as the other is my equal, my superior or my inferior; (2) a praxeological level distancing or approaching the other, going from submission to the other to the other's submission or falling into an undifferentiated neutrality; (3) an epistemic level with "endless gradation between the lower and highest states of knowledge" (Todorov, 1984, p. 185) regarding the other's identity. Here we can realize the paradoxes of the destruction of pre-Colombian empires by the Spaniards: Cortez' letters show that they did understand Montezuma's culture, and that thanks to this understanding they destroyed it.

As the same author remarks, there exist relations and affinities between these levels, "but no rigorous implication; hence, we cannot reduce them to one another nor anticipate one starting from the other" (Todorov, 1984, p. 185). This is important because Western civilization tends to assimilate sympathy with knowledge, resulting most of the time in reduction to a single (Western) value and the imposition of single way of life which obliterates the strangeness by placing it at one of the infinite possible positions along the scale between the two poles.

Besides these reflections on the conception of the other, Todorov also points to the interlinked hermeneutical and semiotic behavior. On the one hand, there is the emphasis placed by native Americans upon language in the sense of preestablished and fixed meaning. This derives from the ritual hierarchical social order which has no place for indetermination and where language concerns the exercise of power and communication with the world. Stars and planets tell them how to behave and what to do about the already known future. Their world was full of miracles and prophecies which tied their social and cultural actions to a highly deterministic semiotic device. On the other hand, there is the European's conception which regards human communication and language as equivocal instruments which "serve as well for integration within community as for the manipulation of the other," (Todorov, 1984, p. 123). In fact, the character of the Spanish language is such that it can be translated into political action quite close to Machiavelli's, setting the Spaniards free to act according to the exigencies of the circumstances. Both models of hermeneutical behavior render dialogue impossible and enable us to understand why otherness, in whatever sense, could not come into being.

In order to give an appropriate place to Todorov's dialogic recognition of otherness, it is necessary to look at the turn taken by philosophy and philosophy of language. Since Aristotle, the Western philosophical tradition
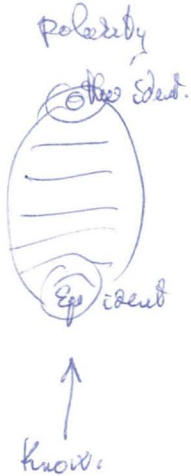
has located the Logos that enhances human language exclusively in the expositive or representative function of propositional statements. The communicative or pragmatic (according to Charles Morris), aspect of the use of language has been considered as non-relevant for the truth, meaning and intersubjective value of conventional language signs. Attention to self-consciousness gives birth to a philosophy of the subject which could assume two attitudes toward the world: objectivism in terms of knowledge, and mastering in terms of action; both of these functions define the subject. Habermas in his universal pragmatic and Apel in his transcendental semeiotics, (for a discussion of this see De Zan, 1990) had provided the point of departure for a new paradigm opposite the philosophy of the subject: namely the inter-subjective model or language and communication approach. In this model, the subject constitutes and defines himself as self-consciousness, not through objectivation or action upon over the world, but in inter subjective relationships through the communicative use of language. It is dialogic communication and communicative interaction that enables interlocutors to recognize and constitute themselves as subjects. It is inside this communicative community that subjects could reach inter subjective understanding in relation with things. Through recognizing this they constitute the valid world of meaning and give the social world and its institutions their sense of community or sharing.

Gadamer and Hermeneutic Experience

Apparently, this emphasis upon communication could deflect us from the hermeneutical concern, but as a succinct presentation of Gadamer's work will show this seems not to be the case. My goal here is to offer a hermeneutical background as related to the conception of otherness. I shall avoid discussing the relation between the theories of Gadamer and Habermas (or Apel) both because of its complexity and because there are recent studies on this topic (see, for example, Silverman, ed., 1991).

Among the forms of knowledge in ancient Greece (namely, *epistéme, techné, phronesis, sophia,* and *nous*), Gadamer emphasizes *phronesis* as the paradigm of hermeneutic understanding: the non-methodological application of general principles to particular situations in order to remain open to the contingencies of experience. In this way, *phronesis* as practical judgment contrasts to a teleological use of knowledge or productive reason (*techné* in this case). As Aylesworth points out (in Silverman, 1991, p. 72): "Through *phronesis* the self is constituted in its moral character (*ethos*). As the practice of moral reason, *phronesis* involves an other or others with whom I interact, and whose claims upon me cannot be codified into a set of rules or laws. On the contrary, moral judgment is specific to each situation and its application cannot be guided by any scheme or concept(. . .)". This transactional character of *phronesis*, as well as its non-teleological orientation, explain the dialogical model of interpretation in Gadamer' interpretative

model. *Phronesis* remains open to the contingencies of life experience.

He characterizes three types of "hermeneutic experience" in terms of three types of relation between the I and the Thou (which, for our purposes, is the relation between the I and the other). This typology strongly resembles Todorov's scale between the same polarity, as exposed above, but Gadamer's model intends the thou (other) in the sense of tradition, that is, the other as the experience of historicity. The one who has the first type of experience looks at the other (thou) as an object, and identifies tradition as inherent to "human nature." On the second level, the thou is acknowledged as a person, but the understanding of the latter is still self-related: imitation, parody or reflection of the other discourse could range from a minimum tension (identification) to a maximum (destructive parody). The third and highest type of experience is openness to the thou, a commitment to experience the thou truly as thou in a conversational mode. Nevertheless, both models would allow one to go from looking at the other as an object (excluding all subjective elements), to an openness to the thou. They make possible a commitment to experience the other truly as other, "i.e. not to overlook his claim, but to listen to what he has to say to us" (Bialostosky, 1989, p. 116). And although this field is open for discussion, in both authors the dialogical processes are models in terms of a philosophy of intersubjectivity.

Note that hermeneutical understanding is always self-understanding, which implies that subjective identity is to be sought in the intersubjective use of language. "Strictly speaking, then, the moral self has no individual identity. It is an habituated openness that is always in transition" (Aylesworth, in Silverman, 1991, p. 72). Thus Gadamer's hermeneutics develops a dialogical model of interpretation and understanding, conditioned by the affections, practices and conceptual frameworks of a cultural heritage. What is of interest here is that a major aspect of hermeneutical understanding consists directly in cultural interpretation and its relationship to the construction of identity. At the very minimum, this hermeneutic assertion forces a reconsideration of the way identity is negotiated by each generation on an historical basis and by each ethnicity on a territorial basis.

E. Levinas: Otherness and Complementarity

As Emmanuel Levinas has been considered the philosopher of otherness, here his work must be considered foundational. To review Levinas's doctrine of otherness in detail is beyond present capacities and purposes. But it is important to note some topics that help to deal with the interdisciplinary network needed in order to integrate the process of recognizing otherness into an experience of dialogue. The relationship with otherness which conditions the very possibility of representation and truth is identified by Levinas as an ethical topic. This relationship does not seek appropriation through representation, but is aware of the appeals from the other which make de-

mands on me. "One begins with the idea that duality must be transformed into unity, and that social relations must culminate in a communion. This is the last vestige of a conception that identifies being with knowledge, that is, with the event through which the multiplicity of reality ends up referring to a single being and where, through the miracle of clarity, everything that encounters me exists as coming from me" (Levinas, 1989, p. 164).

For Levinas as for Gadamer, to a certain extent otherness and singularity are not present, but in the past: the other is different mot only from me, but from things and from others. This consideration enables to understand the double condition of the other as both ego and other in relation to me. The ethical orientation of Levinas's otherness emerges here in all its dimension: "(. . .) a mode of being and saying where I am endlessly obligated to the Other, a multiplicity in being that refuses totalization and takes form instead as fraternity and discourse, an ethical relation which forever precedes and exceeds the egoism and the tyranny of ontology" (Levinas, 1989, p. 1). This complementarity and dialogic mode turns identity (which is monologic of itself) into a conversational being, as Gadamer states: "It is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says (1975, p. 347).

These insights of Levinas enable us to go beyond the limitations inherent to Todorov's three levels of the emergence of otherness, where tensions and ambivalences are the "natural" consequences of a linguistic and semiotic approach. Using such a framework, it should be possible to look at otherness not only us a sociological or semiotic object, but as a frontier or border at which it is possible to pass from one science to another. This is the sense of Serres' claim (1980, p. 18): " The passage is narrow and rare . . . the path does not cross an homogeneous and empty space. Usually the passage is closed . . . and if the passage is open it follows a path that is difficult to gauge".

But more to our concerns here is the fact that each of these authors emphasizes so strongly the complementarity between I and Other which engenders the possibility of transforming the semiotic and hermeneutic topic into an ethical concern. In this way, the social and cultural dimensions of each of the positions of the I and the Other are mediated by an ethical process as in Gadamer's *phronesis*.

M. Bakhtin and Heteroglossia

Let us now turn our attention toward the last theoretician upon whom we shall draw, Mikhail Bakhtin. The hermeneutic concern of the Russian scholar is well expressed in this quotation: "Truth is not born nor is to be found inside the heart of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of the dialogic interaction"

(1984, p. 110). Bakhtin contrasts this dialogic and collective manner of seeking truth to the official monologism, which according to our metaphor of the frontier sees as tending to suppress the "alien word" (the other in our metaphor of the frontier). In the more socially oriented theory of Bakhtin, the other maintains its otherness in the collective subject. In this definition, Bakhtin introduces the concept of "heteroglossia" which goes further in defining the dialogic relationship. Thibault (1989) summarizes this as follows:

> This concept is Bakhtin's attempt to formulate the diversity of social meaning making practices and their textual voicings, which are articulated in relation to each other in the social formation. These heteroglossally related discourse varieties (cf. social registers) intersect in relations of alignment, consensus, competition, conflict, collusion, cooptation, and cooperation in particular textual productions" (p. 185).

In fact, both centripetal (centralizing) and centrifugal (de-centralizing) forces and practices are at work in social heteroglossia, which is constructed through the interplay of these two tendencies. If the centripetal forces rule, the equivalence principle draws together the plurality of forces and meanings into a single (monologic) locus of power and knowledge, reducing multiplicity to an identity that rejects otherness. The centrifugal forces are constituted by those principles of difference "which can articulate points of resistance to the first tendency and, perhaps, re-articulate these to some opposed principle (Thibault, 1989, p. 185). Once again we find a close relationship with Todorov's theories.

A further dimension of social heteroglossia should be noted, namely, the axiological or evaluative. The axiological dimension articulates value judgments in relation both to its own discourse as well as to the voices of others in a way that every voice, implicitly or explicitly, constructs an evaluative Position toward the others. All these authors approached the distinction "self" and "other", which exists because of the process of semiosis rather than of a transcendent division as in Descartes' dualism of subject--object, as a dialogic interplay, where each one of the positions is defined in relationship with the other, i.e., they are not radically alien one to the other, but complementary. Also, they remarked the presence of an evaluative, ethical, dimension in this encounter which provides a model for going beyond theoretical discussion into the practice of cultural implications where hermeneutics, as Gadamer urges, is the exercise of an ethos, the constitution of a world, but not the use of a simple tool, or in his words: "A text is not a given object, but a phase in the execution of the communicative event." The epiphany of the other, in Levinas' words, or Bakthinian exotopic (the condition for heteroglossia), or the historical emergence of the thou in Gadamer did not come out as a general reality during the Spanish Conquest. Most

HYBRID SIGNS

Babel Revisited

Let us begin presenting a metaphor in order to summarize our ideas: from the Tower of Babel, where the heteroglossia is seen as a punishment, we come to the conception of heteroglossia as a gift, though also a challenge, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Gillo Dorfles (1989) called this "a new Babel" and, looking at Derrida's translation theory, he spoke of heteroglossia as "maturity". One of its exigencies is to move away from the center (Verlust Der Mitte), to look for non-symmetrical pathways to reach more the creative life environments called for by Rudolph Arnheim (1982).

This marginal search directs our attention again toward "queer signs" and the possibility of integrating them into the body of our hermeneutic and semiotic traditions. Thus, the semiotic encyclopedia of a culture is challenged to include and connect meaning and truth in their semantic and hermeneutic circuits--thereby expanding their enclosure and extending their signification. As in all living systems, there is resistance to this irruption, "because of our intolerance of anxiety, uncertainty, disruption, entropy and because of our need for self-preservation, symbolic orders, and an understandable (not necessarily understood) universe" (Spinks, 1991, p. 71). If contemporary science "has taught us that trajectories can become unstable and that stochastic chaos can become creative " (Prigogine and Stengers in Serres, 1982, p. 153), and that this need to stop or rule change has "negentropy, to resist the flow and entopic dissolution, is genetically evolutionary" (Stinks, 1991, p. 70), then cultural systems face culturally, that is, in a semiotic and hermeneutic manner, the passage from 'being to becoming', to express this with the title of one of Prigogine's works (1980).

Latin American countries came very late to modernity. Almost all the nations conserved agrarian cultures as the foundation for identifying themselves in the semiotic and symbolic orders. Even the revolutionary processes, whether successful or not, have had as a basic premise the building up of the utopia each one of them offered: land redistribution as a symbolic act to reassume and preserve an agrarian past, and a sign production devise rooted in land, and then in other realities. The very revolution that these movements obtained was to move into the cities in a non-stop migration from rural areas. In this way, the segmentation of Latin American countries could be realized as a consciousness.

Those nations were not homogeneous, as has been assumed; the Hispanic Catholic heritage had evolved in each corner in unimaginable manners: language, habits and religion all manifested heteroglossic diversity which in most cases States were not able to handle. The tensions between the idea of Nation and the different regions or territories, which in the last century were controlled by military intervention, found in the city a place

for expression in an amplified daily manner. At the same time, the cities became not only urbanized but also ruralized. Traditional local and homogeneous rural communities, with strong Indian accents in some places, entered into an ever changing symbolic network which interacts permanently with transnational structures of sign production and distribution.

This encounter clashes in many ways with the efforts to achieve the definition of a modern state and the economic and political practices which could fit this goal. National states dealt with differences by ignoring or repressing them, creating a false nationalistic facade, built upon timeless folklore and xenophobic stereotypes. In fact, this generates two representational cartographies: on the one hand is the nation represented by a map and ruled by legal operations, on the other hand is the cartography of territories represented by lived space. But as Garcia Canclini points out: "The affirmation of the regional or of the national have no sense or efficacy in rejecting the exogenous: thought now must be in terms of the possibility for interacting from proper positions with the multiple international symbolic implications" (1989, p. 332). And against al the forecasts, traditional cultures have not disappeared: they have evolved into transformed frames.

In another approach to this struggle from semiotics Lotman (1969) delineates two culturally oriented semiotic styles: The textually oriented cultures and the grammatically oriented cultures. In the first style, all socially acceptable behaviour is generated by a set of exemplifications, as in urban societies; by contrast, the gramatically oriented cultures make the rules explicit, as happens in rural unambiguous communities. Further, both individual and social beings become "subjects in a process". This is where the dialogic nature of urban Latin American communities could be discovered for their two levels of identity, social and individual, come into a negotiated and endless process: the city is the place to face the other as otherness and negotiate our identity.

What is fundamental here is the turn from rural to urban appropriation and production of signs. Even if the city be a setting of conflict, it provides as well a place for the inter-play of is the experience of otherness and recognition: "Confrontation is the manner of the interplay of inequity and difference" (Garcia Canclini, 1989, p. 259). This theatrical terminology could be articulated through Gadamer's conception of play as a metaphor of the process of understanding or interpretation (hermeneutic) itself. For these divergences the city, far from being destructive, is the possibility in intolerant cultures to face the other. Paradoxically, it is in the environment provided by Latin American cities that there develops an ecological consciousness, which is the non-human face of the other.

Colombian philosopher Danilo Cruz Velez attributed urban growth to the Latin-american's feeling toward Nature: "There is no other person with as weak a perception of nature as the Latin-american" (quoted by Silva, 1992, p. 185). It is then in the city that the other, as different territories, and

nature, as the non-human side of Otherness, could be faced. Urban lifestyle makes possible the emergence of an environmental consciousness by contrasting the "miseries" and limitations of city life to the surrounding and almost virgin nature. This makes urban experience in these countries quite singular. In fact, even the mass media plays on important role here, quite different from the dubious one attributed to it by Marxists researchers in the 60's and 70's: Monsivais and Martín Barbero (in García Canclini, 1989, pp. 237-238) emphasize the contribution that radio and movies had in showing the Latin-American peoples their differences, ethnic and regional, and the convection of all those differences in the constitution of national identities.

Cultural Heritage and Change

Besides all these possibilities, it is true that citizenship does not erase the conflicts: "they are placed in another register which is multifocal and more tolerant. Cultural autonomy must be thought again, and without the risk of fundamentalism" (García Canclini, 1989, p. 304). This explains the "more liberal" approach to political and social issues in the cities than in the countryside. This is also a more "healthy" way to look at conflicts, because they are situated within the perspective of a dynamic and open dialogic relationship. We could take here an hermeneutic approach. Gadamer and Ricoeur agree that interpretation is temporal, and that the best model for hermeneutic understanding is time experience. In fact, Gadamer suggest that one of the most fundamental experiences of time is that of a discontinuity, or becoming other. According to him, at least three "epochal experiences" enter our self-understanding as temporal discontinuity:

- The experience of old age, which takes place as a sudden revelation, not as gradual progression.
- The transition from one generation to another.
- The "absolute epoch", which Christianity brought to western civilization, but which led to the technological conception of the future as able to be planed and subject to control.

I would situate the possibility of these epochal experiences in the city environment. They are fundamental to understanding how tradition is transmitted and conserved, because it is in the city where the sensibility toward time emerges sharply. Traditional cultures lost their exclusive relationship with territories in moving to the city, but, at the same time, they obtained access to knowledge and communication. In some way, as García Canclini writes "Now all the cultures are frontier cultures" (1989, p. 325), meaning that transitions between different social and cultural actors take place throughout hybrid sign production and interpretation. In spite of radical differences between cultures, the contact and unconscious dialogue which takes place there creates patterns of interchange and development which are more coherent in explaining cultural life then approaches which emphasize resistance and tradition as a hard core which does not change. Today it is

not possible to impose concepts like polarities between cultivated and non cultivated, modern and traditional folk production and artistic objects: the interchanges and recognition of otherness from one level to another make it impossible to separate them neatly. At a level preceding the theoretization of post-modernism, in our urban-rural cities as in many other places in the so-called Third world, the practice of daily life has been carrying out semi-otic hybridization through the exploration of marginal signs, which in other contexts has been interpreted as a "post-modern" condition. Latin-american urbanization enabled us to experience otherness, and to accept it by articulat-ing the radical condition of the other in our symbiotic order, sometimes in painful ways.

Cities such as Bogota, Ciudad de Mexico, Tijuana or Santiago cross through modernization, but "the problem is not whether we have modern-ized, but in the contradictory and unequal way to articulate these modern components" (Garcia Canclini, 1989, p. 330). In fact, Latin American cul-tures are the result of the sedimentation, juxtaposition and mixing of Indian, black and hispanic colonial cultures, and of educational and political action toward modernity. But in those patterns, which differ in each region, there were no temporal contradictions: temporal heterogeneity which exists as a reality shows that traditions and mass, popular and folk cultures are together assumed by people as a source for creativity and daily living.

To assume one's cultural heritage in such a way is not the privileged access for the common people. American artists had been doing almost the same without the sharp discussions of the social theoreticians. Examples include: the tropical and the enigmatic colors and signs of Wilfredo Lam (a cuban-chinese); the mythic imagination of Asturias (a Guatemalan) and García Márquez (a Colombian); the tales of exile of Skármeta (a Chilean living in Germany) and Bryce Echenique (a Peruvian who teaches in France); the explosive rhythms of Celia Cruz (a Cuban born who lives in Miami) and Rubén Blades (from Panama) . . . . All these, who are but a sample, do not reject modern cultures not do they remain tied to tradition: the integrate hybrid signs which make us aware of the dynamic of cultural evolution and change--a pattern of behaviour already assumed by common people across the so-called third world.

This semiotic network does not know frontiers, either between ethnic or national origins, or between cultivated or folkloric traditions: all the signs are embodied and resemantized, connected to another times and readings, interpreted and played in an undifferentiated and heroic process. Cultural Babel is, thus, not only an assumption of difference, of Otherness, but of the living experience of a cultural heritage; it incorporates not only spaces (regions and territories) but times (from the past to the future). The marginal signs which remain for many years as folkloric or popular culture begin to be interwoven, closing the gap between generations and territories. The city, in its dialogic dynamics, pushes the recognition of otherness and its full

integration as a part of the cultures.

But to be inside the city it is not enough to develop the dialogic imagination, as Bakhtin called it. Even inside, there is the display of conflicts which makes possible the awareness of the many processes which were visible but hidden. In Medellin (Colombia), only after the projection of a film about the conflicts of on adolescent group in the streets of the city (Rodrigo D.: No future) and the release of two or three books on the same topic (*No nacimos pa' semilla* and *El pelaito Que no duró nada*), did people and government, despite their different background and concerns, begin to act to help the popular neighborhoods, for they had been appealed to by a reality that must be "played" (in Gadamer's sense) in order to be understood.

This is not, of course, a formula, but it addresses what is basic: Through creative work, and not merely as aesthetic exercise, culture assumes and links components which had been marginal and had not been seen as part of the cultural symbolic order. Levinas recognizes this in the following text: "Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are ontological par excellence: they make the understanding of being possible" (1987, p. 82). Are we, as Sahagún and Durán were, suspicious of hybridation in our contemporary societies?

The process of recognition of other's otherness which had begun in a subtle way in the works of Las Casas, Durán, Sahagún and many others in the distant XVI century, now recommences vigorously in urban settings. In fact, as Todorov reminds us, those works remained unpublished until XIX century, and there are thousands more which sleep a dream that has lasted centuries in Madrid's and Seville's archives, holding the cues of our hybrid identity, as Gante's catechism already shows. The research done by Néstor García Canclini through many Latin American countries (1989), or the work by Armando Silva (1992) comparing Bogotá's and Sâo Paulo's semiotic urban production, or Clifford Geertz' insights on local forms of knowledge (1983) sustain the basic assumption presented in this work: within the complex semiotic and interpretative interchanges which that occur in cities can be mapped our present and future reality, the ways to "invent tradition" and progress in reaching a better life for all. The price we must pay for it is the recognition of our new condition of heteroglossic cultures.

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Latin American countries now are trying to lay at least the beginnings of societies based upon the full recognition of their radical Otherness, as an antidote against intolerance.

SIGNS IN COLLISION

The Dialogue of the "Twelve Apostles"

The history of the hermeneutic semiotic clash between Europe and the new world is a tortuous route to follow, and a growing number of studies are mapping it in a very detailed manner. But it will be useful for our purposes to recall three moments in this encounter.

In 1524, an expedition of 12 Franciscan brothers, under the direction Friar Martin de Valencia, arrived in Mexico. Following the wishes of Bishop Zumarraga, they attempted to establish a dialogue between these so-called "Twelve Apostles", and the Indian priestly class in order to contribute to an evangelization based upon peaceful doctrinal interchange. From the notes on this colloquia, the pupils of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco wrote a manuscript which was lost until the beginning of this century when it was found in the Archives of the Vatican Library.

At the beginning of this dialogue, we can find an effort to translate and articulate some pre-hispanic religious concerns into Christian concepts. "God's word is in the divine book, words of Ipalnemohuani, the one who gives Life." But next the missionaries add: "The One that You had not yet known" (CENAMI, 1989, p. 7). In chapter IV, the missionaries talked about God using Indian names: *In Huell nelli Teotl, Tlatoani* (the One who rules), *In Ipalnemohuani, In Tloque Nahuaque* (Lord of the Next World and of Both Worlds). But, as if returning to doctrinal orthodoxy the Spanish priests said that they were there in order to "cleanse your faults by the precious water of Our Lord". In chapter VI, the Indian governors answer:

> Sirs, why did you come to rule our city? We take the new word as a heavenly one, that you had said (. . .) but what can we say now? Though we act now as governors, we are really mothers and fathers of the people, and we must destroy the old life rule to follow You? Must the old rule that was much appreciated by our grandparents and the one that our lords, the governors, kept with admiration, be destroyed (CENAMI, 1989, p. 10)?

Before the demands from the Spanish friars that they change their old religion, the answer of Indian governors is closely related to the tradition and to the arguments offered in the next chapter for their religion by the quequetzalcoa or priest of the religion. These did not vary, but at the end, their moving words conclude:

In our heart we understand to whom we owe our life, to whom

we owe our birth, to whom we owe our growth and develop-
ment. This is why the gods are prayed to and addressed (. . .
). But, do not worry, our Lords . . . that we do not take as a
truth what you had said despite that being able to perturb you.
. . . It is enough that we lost the war and governance. . . .
Make of us as you want. . . . This is our answer to your pious
words, our Lords (CENAMI, 1989, p. 13)

The next two chapters conclude with a sermon by the Franciscan
Brothers about God, the Angels and the Demons. It attributes to the old reli-
gion a confusion that makes Mexicans "take these evils as their gods", and
in this manner explains to them the "true" origin of their religion.

Far beyond anything else, this "dialogue" illustrates well a collision of
interpretations and of signs. In tune best of cases, the Spanish chronicles
speak well of the Indians, but, as in this document, and with very few ex-
ceptions, they do not speak to the Indians. The dialogue, in fact, was be-
tween the twelve themselves, in spite of the good intentions that underline
their effort. "Now, it is only by speak I to the other (not giving orders but
engaging in a dialogue) that I can acknowledge him as a subject, comparable
to what I am myself" (Todorov, 1984 p. 132). The failure in communication
in this encounter illustrates as well the triumph of centripetal (monologic)
forces in the discourse, despite the hopeful signs of openness or centrifugal
forces at the beginning. Friar Bernardino de Sahagún in commenting on the
identification between the Virgin Mary and the Aztec goddess Tonantzin,
sees this as the result of a "satanic invention." Todorov comments that, both
in Dura and in the dialogue of the twelve "the dialogue of cultures is fortu-
itous and unconscious. As an ace of uncontrollable slippage, it is not (and
cannot be) erected into a method" (1984, p. 241).

But I would add that in the very showing of the slippage in the po-
tential dialogue a rudimentary semiotic and hermeneutic process of otherness
recognition, takes place. In some way, the frontiers and boundaries which
exclude from a semiotic and hermeneutical system the signs of the "unsway-
able" or the "unthinkable", have experienced the intrusion of foreign and
marginal signs. Spinks (1991) suggested that "when one signifies one thing,
one draws a semantic circle around it, which both encloses and excludes.
Thus the sign system turns on the marker of difference and its tension with
similarity. It highlights the cultural other and gives it the urgency of the
"here and now" (p. 136). Duran considered religious syncretism a sacrilege,
and his work was written order to show this: " This is our principal weapon:
to warn them (the clergy) of the confusion that may exist between our own
feasts and those (of the Indians). Pretending to celebrate the festivities of our
God and of the Saints, they insert, mix and celebrate those of their gods
when they fall on same day. And they introduce their ancient rites into our
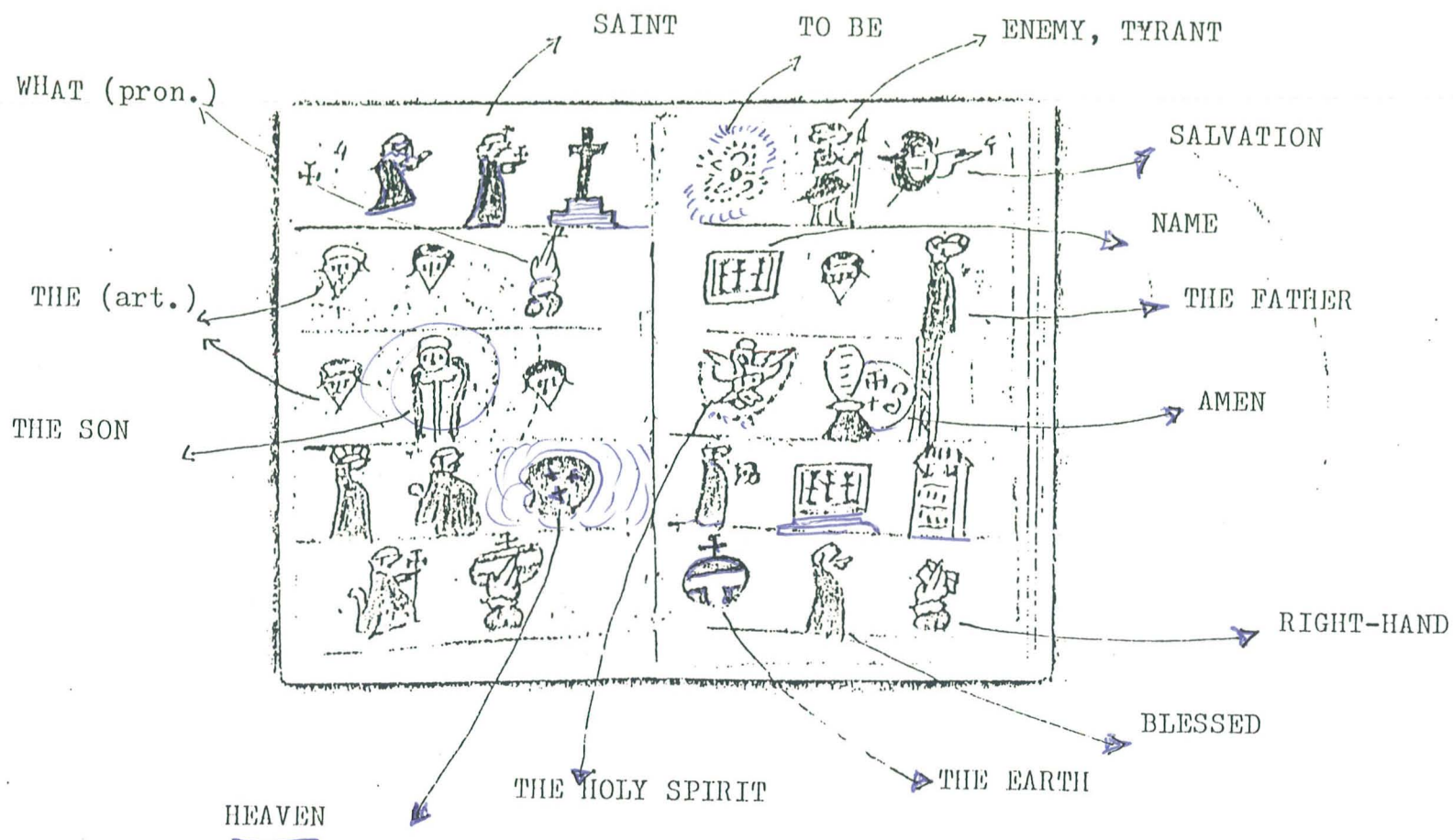ceremonies" (quoted by Todorov, 1984, p. 205).

Duran's warning could be understood in the context of the marginal signs he watched in panic ; "The marginal sign may not just create and discover, it also misleads and deceives. I suspect that the mark of the marginality of a sign is this exact ambivalence, our inability to determine quite to the satisfaction of our more centrist perspectives whether the particular sign can be marked clearly one way or the other" (Stinks, 1991, p. 7). So, Duran looked only at the "evil" side of syncretic signs, not at the potential dialogue that was emerging through them, and their hidden possibilities for evolving further into a full recognition of the other's otherness.

Fray Pedro de Gante's Explicacion de la Doctrina de los Yndios Mucaguas

Let us look now at some very rare early materials developed for the task of evangelization, where the "queer signs", as Wittgenstein called them (1958, p. 79) appeared besides the "orthodox" signs in a very suggestive mode. In the National Historical Archive from Spain, there is a tiny manuscript whose few pages covered with naive drawings expose the Christian doctrine of Catholic Church. The book was made in Mexico in the XVI century by Indians under the direction of Spanish priests. It has no trace of Western signs, except in the last page the signature of Friar Pedro de Gante. This is not the only volume, because there is another at the National Library with drawings of better quality and another in Mexico.

The text begins with the formula for the sign of the Cross, followed by the Pater Noster, the Hail Mary, the Credo, some other prayers and a very obscure explanation of the mystery of the Trinity, and other doctrinal concerns. In fact, there are no major differences between this order and that of the written catechisms printed during the early conquest period. Many were based upon the Cartilla castellana, a brief summary of Catholic teaching. A comparison with the first catechism written in Colombia, the 1576 work of Friar Luis Zapata de Cárdenas revealed no remarkable differences, though the Colombian volume is much more copious in information because of its written character. Perhaps more interesting than the drawings is the way in which the ideas are represented. It is not a hieroglyphic representation, but a kind of mnemonic device, designed to help the Indians in the recitation of their prayers. The drawings themselves are a good example of signs which, in that historical situation, shared a common frontier between two semiotic and hermeneutical systems. These signs provide also an explanation of the tension between two positions in the identification of otherness as they cross back and forth from one polarity to the other, in an asymmetrical mode.

According to Sentenach (1900, pp. 604-607), the signs for the Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Trinity, is one of the figures more closely related to traditional prehispanic design, resembling a gold jewel representing a bird. For death, the sign was a mummy--quite exotic for the Hispanic

WHAT (pron.)

SAINT TO BE ENEMY, TYRANT

SALVATION

NAME

THE (art.)

THE FATHER

THE SON

AMEN

RIGHT-HAND

BLESSED

THE HOLY SPIRIT THE EARTH

HEAVEN

Page 4 of Fray Pedro de Gate's *Explicación de la doctrina de los Yndios mucaguas* (XVI Century). Manuscrito R 12034. Madrid: Archivo Histórico Nacional.

tradition, but quite common in Mexican life. By contrast, other signs that represents in more Western fashion the church, the World, etc. Also, a few signs are adapted from prehispanic origin, like the one that represents a debt or payment. What I want to stress here is the quality of marginality of the signs in this text, and hence, how they push the semantic circle of the meanings of each culture, making changes in their hermeneutic and semiotic behaviors.

Nican Mipohua: An Account of the Apparition

The last example of these marginal or "queer signs", which open the dialogic dimension and make the collision of different cultures a potentially positive contact, is the narration, "Nican Mapohua", written by the Indian Antonio Valeriano, Montezuma's nephew, in nahuatl, about the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the Indian boy, Juan Diego, in 1531. The very word "nahuatl" means harmonic and points to the value that this civilization gave to the words, in a rhetorical tradition of "noble and care full expression". In this text, which missionaries accepted as a proof of their divine task, are quite common the expressions from the nahuatl tradition, literary formulas and religious qualifications now referred to another semiotic world: in a typical nahuatl manner the Divinity frequently is called "The one for whom all is alive". Also followers and singing birds are the threshold of the presence of a deity, both in the classical poetic tradition of the Nahuatls and in the narration about the Virgin. The use of the diminutive as a poetic devise is very well known in the poetry of the famous Nezahualcoyotl from the XV century, but not only in poetry, because in the daily life of nahuatl society this fashion was used in order to make a sweeter and closer relationship between related persons, as well as metaphors: In trying to reject the Virgin's orders, Juan Diego excused himself for being " a little man, a piece of rope, a little wooden ladder, a tail, a leaf, I am little people, an You, My little Girl, the most little one of my daughters, My Lady, You send me to a place where I can not walk nor stand (. . .). The Virgin's expressions are also nahuatl-like: "Juanito, the most little of my children . . . " (all quotations from Seibold, 1992, pp. 26-30).

If, as noted, we can not find dialogue in the first text, the so-called Dialogo de Los doce, we have here a quite different situation: the signs had crossed the frontiers, and now even the Christian God and His Mother express themselves as Nahuatl speaking deities. As shown, marginal signs have pressed heavily upon the boundaries of the cultures allowing human beings to find an adaptive road to handle this semiotic and hermeneutic gap by drawing cultural maps that make room for a new dynamic reality. As Michel Serres puts it, "the mission of culture is to break the connection between spaces, and then connect them again" (Levi-Strauss, 1981).