Book Review

An anthropology of the imaginary: a book review of sorts

- **Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 216 pp.**

Mason's book is about otherness, that eternal enigma of anthropology. Its theme is the imaginary, especially historical imaginary races, its matter is America, its approach is structuralist and interpretative. Reading it gradually conveys a sense of uneasiness, even annoyance, which might be classified as otherness as well. It is a strange book. It evokes the tension between understanding and critical judgement. By commenting upon it, I will violate its strictures and convert it to a discourse I am more familiar with. In doing so, I am no doubt covering its meaning with my own (ideal) anthropological standards. But since I, contrary to Mason, am convinced that the effect of a text is not an intrinsic faculty of that text but dependent on the reader's opinion and preoccupation, I feel justified in applying this particular treatment.

How is America to be deconstructed? If I understand Mason correctly, there is no instant recipe for deconstructionism. If one follows his line of reasoning, however, the procedure looks simple: one relates reality to the view of the beholder and stops at that. For the ingredients, one mixes quotes from philosophers, historians and anthropologists with a vast range of images and stories and lets them simmer until structures emerge. The concoction is then larded with clever remarks and served under the blurb of 'a major scholarly achievement'. If anthropology teaches that the Other is only comprehensible in terms of the Self, the only thing anthropologists have to do, is to collect material from some selves about some others and present it in such a way that the adagium is confirmed. To dress the strange in the familiar is, after all, 'a timeless response by self when faced with the challenge of the other' (p. 25). Mason has collected a huge amount of European historical material about human monsters (the enumeration of their various forms takes up most of the book), among them monsters that were supposed to live in America. He

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presumes that the latter were used to depict American Indians and he undertakes to prove that, as European monsters, they originally belong to a European tradition. The American other is thus represented with the European self.

The book's contents may thus be generally summarized. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to produce a coherent synopsis on a less abstract and simplified level – the author's style is very condensed and not particularly easy to read. He also tends to offer his parameters and conclusions before dealing with empirical issues. For instance, on the first page of Chapter 2, the reader is confronted with Europe's 'internal other', 'and this it [Europe] could project onto the New World outside the confines of Europe' (p. 41). It is possible, one learns next, to comprehend the 'European self' by using the categories 'learned culture' and 'popular culture', the latter being the negative image of Europe's 'educated classes', as well as the representation of its 'subaltern classes'. The undefinable, but still to the present-day author recognizable 'Wild Man' ('Any definition of the Wild Man is arbitrary and ethnocentric' (p. 44)), should have been one of the figures the élite used to imagine (European and exotic) outsiders. Subsequently, all sorts of wild men are brought into the limelight: a Wild Man as a giant armed with a club, a Wild Man with one eye and one foot, one with a dog-head and boar's tusks, extremely hairy wild men (and women), Sumerian, Greek, Roman wild men, etcetera. Following chapters deal with the so-called 'Plinian races, which are described in Plinius' *Historia Naturalis* and were later on incorporated in medieval tradition. To understand these monsters one should, according to Mason, consider how they (and especially their bodies) deviate from normal humans. In this way, for example, he tries to explain why of all the Plinian races four (men-eaters, headless people, amazons and giants) were particularly popular as representations of (South-) American Indians. To cite only one conclusion:

> The headless Ewaipanoma . . . conforms to one of the rules of the production of the exotic: the exotic is always *empty*, it is characterised by *lack*, and this incompleteness calls forth and justifies attempts to fill in this gap in iconographical, textual, sexual and military terms. (p. 110)

One is tempted to see *Deconstructing America* as an historiographic analysis of European images of the American continent and its inhabitants, but that would be a mistake. For although the presentation is structured on a series of arguments that may in part have been borrowed from historical material, the actual derivation cannot be evaluated because the (sometimes second or even third-hand) sources are mainly used to provide (positive) examples within the argumentation. The selection of these examples is not made clear – possible conflicting 'facts' are not given. A well-reasoned corpus of sources is lacking; the meanings of their contents are taken from modern authors and from superficial phenomenological comparison. A refined sociological analysis of

the historical users is missing too. All that can be gleaned from the text is that they belonged to some undifferentiated European élite ('the upper echelons of society' (p. 44) or 'the courtly and urban cultures' (p. 97)), which is not much in line with the complexity of European societies. By focusing on the 'otherness' of the contents of the material he has selected and collected, Mason obviously forgot to treat his European informants as 'others' with their own particularities, grounded in historical praxis.

The book's otherness derives mainly from the combination of abstract monologue with the almost endless catalogues of fantastic humanlike beings; it is not a result of the theme itself. So it is debatable if monstrous people are especially suitable to discuss otherness with. They (or their images) are, after all, produced by people the author does not describe as 'other'. As such, they are merely a translation of the self. To him, they are nevertheless the solution to the problem of domination that accompanies anthropological representation of others. He concludes: 'because they [the monstrous races] do not represent anything, but refer only by way of self-reference, they avoid the violence which is an inevitable part of the unifying and reductive labour of anthropology' (p. 174). This is hardly convincing, among other things because the author has explicitly and a priori stated: 'The question of the verifiable existence of such peoples is suspended' (p. 15), that is to say, 'not on the agenda' (p. 14). Of course, like every other symbol they do lend themselves to interpretation and to depicting (some) reality, as he elaborately shows. If 'otherness' is related only to itself, why would representation be problematic? When consuming the book, one of the difficulties one is confronted with is that its author, by replacing cultural existence with 'external reality' or 'truth', does not deal with the imaginary as an anthropological problem, that is to say as a native or even academic category. What is 'imaginary' for whom? The same applies to categories like human, animal and divine, which are used to delimit the monstrous races. Instead of answering these anthropologically important questions, Mason stresses the textuality of anthropological discourse.

At first, this seems reasonable: both 'reality' and the 'imaginary' are subject to textualization, they are only to be known as (parts of) texts. Empirical control or verification in practice is often impossible (as is the case with most historical texts), but also unnecessary according to Mason. '"Reality" is as much bound up with discourse as theory' (p. 14). It is itself 'a product of the activity of our imagination' (p. 15). However, after he has (in my view rightfully) deconstructed the opposition between reality and the imaginary, Mason proceeds to reintroduce the latter as a workable category, among others by focusing on all sorts of 'imaginary' beings and even defining them as the subject of 'ethno-anthropology'. (Both the 'imaginary' as a representation of 'reality' and as a contradiction of it occur in the text). I simply fail to see why the polarity between monsters and humans is not liable to the same deconstruction as the one between 'fiction' and 'reality'. In numerous places he

also presents 'evidence' for particular statements which does not seem to be restricted to texts; extra-textual reality keeps popping up, for instance when the author provides data on discoveries of lands or publications of books or when he serves interpretations of historical events, without questioning their referential 'truth'. Verification, it seems, is only explicitly bracketed when the imaginary is involved; 'it is more rewarding to examine these patterns in the light of Greek thought about non-Greeks than to track down the "lost tribes" which might be supposed to conform to such descriptions' (p. 75), Mason points out when discussing a passage from Herodotus. Such a remark is revealing as well as confusing. Set beside a sentence from that same page ('The expansion of the Greek world from the seventh century [BC] on gave travelers the opportunity to widen their horizons in the literal sense'), it on the one hand clarifies the author's rather orthodox notion of 'reality'. On the other hand, it destabilizes the reader's trust in the theoretical fireworks that have been set off earlier in the book; it devalues the idea of 'fiction' as that which is made, regardless of its reality value.

If the deconstruction of the imaginary–reality opposition is taken seriously and applied to all the fragments of the text in which 'truth' is represented, the conclusion is inescapable that it is mainly meant as an excuse for a structuralist approach to texts and pictures that are considered 'fictional' in the ordinary sense of 'fantastic'. The author adds further fuel to this conclusion by submitting interpretation to classification and excluding cultural relativism, 'for admission of relativism would deprive many of them of their monstrosity' (p. 89)! In fact, the decontextualized 'monsters' are used to construct the articulation of 'fundamental notions'. In the process, the concrete, acting 'other' is robbed of his or her uniqueness and dissolved into a universal system for the interpretation of (monstrous) body-language, in which the sexual and the economic prevail.

In spite of all his theoretical justifications, Mason shows himself to be an antiquarian accumulator of exotic examples, who is incapable of a critical assessment of the work of the contemporary authors he relies on. By deconstructing some systems, others are constructed or taken for granted. The reader is bombarded with all sorts of statements and is asked to digest them in the holy names of structuralism and textuality. Economics, for instance, boils down to the economy of texts: 'The text itself constitutes the reality of sexuality and economy as social practices' (p. 173). 'The representations of America . . . are symbolic effects of sexually and economically structured texts, rather than the reflection of some sexually and economically structured external reality' (p. 174). The political use of those texts in history is left out of the picture.

Mason's theory and its concretizations are, in the end, nothing more than a game with images and texts for one player. In my opinion, games can be very interesting, even as an academic pastime. It would, however, have been convenient if the author had informed his readers of the playful nature of his

monologue beforehand. The dialectical relation between anthropologists and their subjects of inquiry remains enigmatic and the 'imaginary' as part of political praxis still awaits a systematic and critical analysis.

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