

LIGHTS IN CALINGASTA VALLEY: REALITY AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE “EXTRAORDINARY”

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Diego Escolar Biography:

Diego Escolar was born in Buenos Aires city, Argentina, in 1966.

He studied Anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), receiving his PhD in 2003.

Since 1992, the central scenario for his research activities was the Cuyo region (San Juan and Mendoza provinces), on the border with Chile, stretching over the Andes mountains and the desert of the Argentine west. He conducted research on the life and history of rural or *gaucho* populations in the region (herdsmen, muleteers, *baqueanos*, shepherds, hunters, small farmers), for which purpose he lived with the inhabitants of dry lowlands or *travesías*, and crossed the Andes between Argentina and Chile on horseback on numerous occasions.

His doctoral dissertation specifically addressed the resurgence, since the 1990's decade and from among these very populations, of indigenous identities related to the Huarpe people, believed to be extinct as of the 17th century. During the field trips made for these investigations, in 1998, he lived the experience narrated on this website.

Field works and other activities related to his research were supported, in addition to the National University of Buenos Aires (UBA), by the National Council for Technical and Scientific Research (CONICET), the National Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology (ANPCyT), the Institute of Economic and Social Development (IDES) and the Antorchas Foundation in Argentina, as well as by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) of the United States of America.

As a result of his research studies he has published many works in books and scientific journals, books in cooperation, and a book of his own that is close to publication in Argentina and other countries.

Currently Diego Escolar is a member of the scientific researcher career of the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research in his country, and a professor at the National University of Cuyo in the province of Mendoza, Argentina.

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Abstract:

The confrontation with extraordinary events that question our own conceptions of “reality” seems to be one of the more seductive expectations of the ethnographical experience. Starting with description of my own fieldwork experiences of interaction with extraordinary light phenomena in the Andes of Argentina, I will analyze to what extent scientific gap in the research of the “extraordinary” can be intended from anthropological praxis and discursive genres.

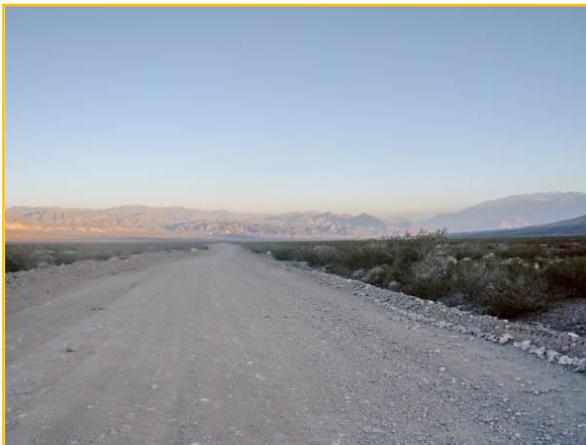
PART I: THE ANOMALOUS SIGHTING EXPERIENCE:



I take my time letting the reins loose from the burned post of the old telegraph and then I follow the rest of the “Brancaleone Army” of the hunters-horse thieves who disappear among the bushes, the stones, in this arid valley at the west of Argentina, near the Chilean border; and at the top of the Andean Range golden and red clouds appear, the last chromatic senders of the Pacific. The spurs clashing and the horse teeth bouncing on the bit. While I start to gallop, the magic of this habitat permits, certainly, to notice the chaos in this desert. The horsemen seem to form an only heart in movement, with systoles and diastoles getting nearer or further.

An approach in our march joins us and Osvaldo with his bad temper protests for our late departure. Carlos tells again his theory of the “lights that appear and follow the trucks” near the Pampa del Leoncito, which we must cross in our journey towards the Cordillera del Tigre. We are fed up with his story, which is not new nor surprising, because of the dozens of hours of recordings about *luces malas* (bad lights), devils who speak and fight, death-watched people who were alive, lights that signals Indians mummies and treasures, combats among wizards, witches studios of their secret magic books.

Our path has reached the isolated Barreal-Uspallata road which runs like the old Inca road and the old telegraph runs from north to south between the Cordillera and Precordillera de los Andes. The horseshoes sound now on the broken asphalt. I ride in front for a while, leading the group. It is almost night now although summer days are longer and more resistant behind the tops of the Cordillera, and Osvaldo decides to take care of his own anxiety, -“That is not people”_ he says, pointing to a luminous point that for some minutes seems to be lighting on and off moving along the feet of the mountains. In a strange fluorescent green, at a distance of several kilometers, it passes over a car that is coming down an old way of the observatory.



Now it hesitates in extinguishing in the table-land, towards the hills. It seems to be still, it twinkles. Then, it takes off the ground and shines with more intensity. Suddenly I realize that to my companions, that light that we have been watching for some minutes, is not an ordinary object. The bad light (“*la luz mala*”), the light of a treasure, a spirit, a guide. As minutes go by, it is more difficult to explain the source or nature of the light, its movements and the variations in its’ ... behavior?

It comes down the table-land at high speed, moving and leveling with the land, among bushes, stones and furrows of dry rivers. It stops its flight between the foot of the hill and the road. It has made some five kilometers in no more than ten seconds, not in a straight line towards us but in a direction that would cut our way nearly five hundred meters ahead..

It disappears. Some minutes later, it appears again on the table-land but nearer, it comes in a straight line towards us; it stops and turns off again. The same thing happens several times, like a sequence. While we go on our way, each time it appears it does it in the same place in relation to us, just as if it had been moving in an invisible and parallel way. Or...were they another light, coming down the hill, getting nearer? We tried to reason: the *gendarmes* (rangers or frontier policemen) must have started a search. Surely, someone noticed our departure from the village and talked about us. The lights come from their headlights or from their vehicles. “But it is not people”- someone insists, besides the strange color, no noise of broken branches nor stones, not even engines. And the speed? There is no fright, but there is

anxiety, although not much can be done as in this desert there is nowhere to hide and the village is 25 kilometers away.

Now the light follows behind and to one side: intermittent, it gets closer so fast over the land that it appears to be going to collide against us, but then it stops or blinks off. Suddenly we see it on again at one hundred meters from the shoulder of the road, where we have just passed. Its size may be like a football. We stopped to look at it while the horses-to our surprise-only show indifference. Suddenly it moves like a pinball in the air, elevating to five or ten meters and descending in no more than one second. Bravely or in a silly way we march again, as if nothing extraordinary was so important as to interrupt our journey.

It may be half past ten pm. And night has come. A freezing wind makes us think where to spend the night, have a rest, light a fire and roast the meat a little. In this area there is no shelter, except the old man's hut who Carlos knows, but formality advises us not to meet anybody. Four men with a light cargo-at such an hour in the night- are not advisable company; furthermore, the old man had lost a herd of goats which had dispersed wild, towards the south and we could have hunted them, with his expert orientation. To make matters worse, we are still very far from our destination, there are ten hours more to ride.

We should ride aside of the road because towards the south the lights of a car can be seen, probably in ten minutes it will reach us. According to our location, it is necessary to get aside of the road to go across the famous Pampa del Leoncito, where there is not even a tiny bush to protect ourselves. The Pampa, which stands parallel to our right, is a gigantic depression of white clay, as flat as a billiard table, of a length of 12 kilometers, and a width of 6 kilometers. This ancient alluvial layer, where the waters of the Andean Range and the Precordillera drain, is not further than five hundred meters from the road and one must go across a line covered with the typical vegetation of the region.



Several minutes have passed, half an hour perhaps, when we pass along the ruins of the old farm "Leoncito de Abajo", where the hut of the old man stands. Did the dogs bark? A wire fence does not let us go ahead, so we turn left, to the south again, trying to see where it ends. We get across another wire fence, it is evident we are in a fenced site and the only thing to do is return to the road, go on south and face the Pampa again.

Everything OK now. The fenced zone behind us. The mare is a little tired. Just in time, because the lights of the car can be seen at the border of the horizon, but evidently it is coming slowly.

We advance a hundred meters when Osvaldo stops. A small and weak light, like a star, a single cold white-greenish light comes flashing south. It is no more over the road, it is coming but not in a straight way but in a long and continuous zigzag. The gendarmes, the rangers perhaps...but...are they going to get up at such an hour? Or stop drinking to wait for four assholes riding in the country? Anyway we must

escape. We are retiring north. However, it is coming nearer while we continue our forced march. Now we notice some orange-reddish resplendence on the top of it.



Do I see another light, too? Or does Carlos mention it? Or Osvaldo? We have dispersed a little; Osvaldo and his son in front and Carlos and I nearly 30 meters behind. We are going to the old man's hut, fortunately, the woodland is a little thicker now. I take a bullet out of the chamber of my gun, as if this made me less dangerous at the time we get caught. But if they are not gendarmes? I remember the stories about planes that land illegally in the Pampa. Vehicles, the kind of lights that appeared before do not seem to be according to the economical possibilities of the local gendarmes posts. Besides, they are not patrolling this area: the post at the entrance of the village, where the road begins, is unoccupied this year without any explanation.

But the light, being nearer, makes us doubt again: although it has the size of a big vehicle, its reddish resplendence is not seen now and it is clearly a luminous mass which does not project light rays like headlights or reflectors but it seems to lighten with a weak reflection around itself, with a cold and dim light. It looks like a big flat star, with the intensity of a firefly, that lightens without dazzling. There is a strange incongruence between its respectable size and the low luminous intensity. There is no noise. Its zigzag is near and it is "combing" the area. There is no time to escape and we only hope not to be found, if they have not seen us yet. In case it is some security force I will have to get rid of my gun, and try to look for it later.

Osvaldo is very nervous and his son completely mute while they ride looking for a shelter. Carlos and I, behind them, looking with a different attitude. In spite of being worried, I have not stopped telling jokes, as a matter of fact I remember dozens of situations which I lived with more anguish than this one. Carlos seems to feel no fear at all, and he almost wishes to face "the thing". A couple of minutes ago he insisted in not being afraid of the light, in talking to it. In this way the lights guide the brave to those who send it. I feel a kind of emotional anesthesia, thinking we are disorientated and at the same time peaceful in this situation. Why we don't felt panic and escaped at a full gallop yet?

The light, that seems to have a body although it is not similar to anything I know. A light whose brightness I notice among the near bushes. It is suspended in a slow advance at only fifty meters. Osvaldo and his son continue going further. We go round a big bush to hide ourselves. Not noticing the urgency of our escape Carlos gets off his horse and begins to urinate. I stop at his side but I stay on horseback. I remember I have the gun but I do not dare to touch it. It seems to me a silly reaction.

I see Carlos' face white-lightened while he urinates, lightened the same as our horses and the ground. There is no terror but suspense. I remember that Don Alejandro, the old mixed mapuche Indian from the South of Chile, that had taught me about riding horses and many other rural things when I was teenager, told me about the dissuasive effect that knives with a silver handle had among elves and ghosts. But it is difficult for me to put it on my back, between the shoulder blades and with the edge outwards. Steadily I hold the silver handle of my long knife, just on my hip. The light is partially covered by one or two bushes, not more than fifteen meters away. No noise, no heat. Does it have orange and red reflections, and rather a more intense nucleus inside? I do not know if it is difficult to watch, I do not know if we avoid to watch it, I do not know what the others are doing, not even what I am doing. Here I am standing, with the horse and the mare quiet.

Now I am riding again with Carlos, Osvaldo and his son. The light, behind, seems to be stopped. Suddenly, we are against a wire fence. However, the light begins to go backwards slowly. We stay by the fence and a new light turns on beyond it. –“ It is the old man with a lantern! He heard us and is watching what is happening. Will he shoot us?”-I think. It may be an old kerosene lantern, I say to myself, because it does not project a beam.

The light has now grown as a big star almost touching the ground and now we really feel surrounded. Is very near, it moves very slowly and makes a long circle: “Look, they are tracing us!” Osvaldo is right. We are exactly on the other side of the fence and the light follows in detail our previous movements looking for a way out of the site. Now it is more surprising for me: “Get ready to fight with the devil!” Osvaldo concludes. The light is now at some fifteen meters and changing colors red-orange. I hold the knife handle again. It is stopped but in a few seconds it follows back our trace and in a short time it disappears as soon as it had appeared. It is the moment now to reorganize ourselves or what is left of our emotions, with our journey across the Pampa ahead. We wait for some minutes while the light goes further north, steadily and as slowly as it had arrived. I start to put our thoughts in order of the need to cross the Pampa.

I remember the light disappearing and its soft far resplendence while we are galloping towards the Pampa, my horse with her forelegs tired now. There I stop because the saddle bags are loose, hanging over the ground, only sustained by a string. In that moment I feel fear. My companions are galloping far away. Suddenly, I realize that I am not where I thought, in the middle of the Pampa, but reaching the opposite border where the endless table land with rocks and bushes begins. We have made six kilometers in no more than five minutes, I perceive. But Carlos perceived rather the opposite: I realized that the Pampa had never ended, he would say later. However, no light has appeared. Although there is no moon the Pampa shines its ash color. We realize what a distance we have ridden. We must have gone up several kilometers, nearly ten, along a bush-patched area in a close blackness. But according to our orientation sense we have left the Pampa border five minutes ago, it means we have ridden 500 meters in a straight line. We stop to have a look. Perhaps we could make a fire, put a pot of water and some meat on it. But the show has not started.

The Pampa del Leoncito is an oval, with north to south orientation, with a length of twelve km. At our back stands the Cordillera now. We have come north and then crossed from east to west. Our bones are getting tired and it is very cold. It may be one in the morning: the light, far but perfectly seen, has just lightened towards the south end of the oval. We are not surprised any more. We attend to these events in our privileged position. Another light appears in the centre of the Pampa, towards the place that we have crossed. But as Osvaldo says, doing calculations, it is not stopped here but a little to the north, probably more than 500 metres. The light at the north end begins to fly the length of the Pampa, going south, while the other stays still. It seems to go at great speed. In that rhythm it will cross in three or four minutes. This means it goes at a speed of 300 or 400 km an hour.

Oswaldo, still worried by the ability of detecting the traces of *luces malas*. In fact, the light begins to slow down its flight and stops more than one kilometer ahead, passing just in front of the second light, at the exact point where its journey crosses ours. For a moment, perhaps a couple of minutes, we try to understand what the two lights are doing. The moving light is looking for our presence? Why is it “combing” the area when we are not there any more? Why do they reappear now, having left us? Have they let us cross fast to make sure that we are not in the Pampa any more? But, what system is capable to perceive the traces of our march on the hard clay soil, not varying from the uncountable footprints of guanacos, wild cattle, other horses, cars that go across the Pampa in every direction?

Changing colors, turning from white-greenish to orange-reddish. These chromatic changes affect especially at the newly-arrived light, which also starts to manifest other slight transformations. It seems to get wider, have a bigger volume and at the same time go higher than the other, while red is the predominant color. In fact, the red comes apparently from a central nucleus meanwhile its volume nearly spherical tends to get flat on the vertical axis. With all the distance torsion I can say it looks like a cell now, in meiosis, when giving birth. And another light appears, this time from north. Now they are three. The light like a cell, in red, begins to go north, but briefly it dashes like a laser ray towards the sky, in an instantaneous oblique angle which during tenths of second's leaves printed in the retina a red line as a trace of its disappearance.

Further north over the table land where we stand, a red light comes floating over the treetops, flying low and at a good speed, but its low intensity shows it anyway more vulnerable or harmless, which at first only seemed a weak reflection is seen in a round shape, a soft spherical vapor and flat on the poles as it gets nearer.-It is not the inquisitive movements of the light-body, in a relatively dense glaucous body, like a cloud or a jelly galaxy, of the known presences. But different from the others, this one seems to approach with formal decision, straight to us, describing a semi parable but without hesitation: bigger each time, we watch it astonished, elbow to elbow on our horses in line like a wall of snouts against the wind.

Because of the nearness it has lost its transparent character, it has lost again its borders and in seconds it should pass over our heads. This seems to be the feared direct encounter, frontal with the Thing and although we know the horses will not frighten I hold the reins for not being left on foot in such runaway. It gets nearer and nearer and the collision is not heard. I will know it later I do not remember the point, the moment of this unavoidable contact.

Again, with my companions, the red cloud flies towards us; again the parable is repeated until it touches our heads. But, what is next? Does it continue its flight? Does it turn off? What? It comes flying again, nearly in the same direction, maybe nearer, in fact it has just passed, but I do not know what happens during his flight over us (backwards) and the new come (at the front). I only remember repeated comings. No continuity, no way out. My hands continue holding the reins. There is no sensation of a cut in our existence, or our conscience of being.

Again we are looking down the Pampa, to the east, mounted in a horizontal line of parallel horses. The two lights watch over the white plain, one in the centre and the other to the north, now they are complementing with a third one in the south edge, perhaps the same that had crossed the Pampa before, making then a sidereal meiosis, disappearing in the air, and maybe later, flying at a low height over our heads.

Those three lights locate themselves over the Pampa forming a triangle and they start to “talk”. In unison at a terrific rhythm, they twinkle or tremble like the light of a computer disc. In fact the unison is relative, as they do not twinkle altogether; each one has its own speech, they do not turn on and off at the same and

exact moment. This goes on for fifteen or twenty minutes more, while one of my companions and I need to urinate. Surprisingly the lights turn off and disappear; they are not seen any more.

The journey will go on at dawn, but now we must look for somewhere to have something to eat. We start going up to leave the Pampa. It must be about two in the morning and in fifteen minutes we stop in an area with big bushes.

While we are unsaddling we put some meat to roast on a little fire among stones under the branches of a bush. Osvaldo takes out some cold spicy chicken and some wine, too. I go to urinate again, entering into the darkness that all of us fear, without saying anything. I give a dare to take some steps more, where the light of the fire does not lighten. I walk past my horse, and her ears are standing still, looking down giving an alert signal. But nothing happens. After having cut and eaten a piece of roasted meat I sleep on the ground, covered with the leathers of my saddle.

PART II: ANALYSIS OF THE SIGHTING EXPERIENCE FROM A SCIENTIFIC AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE:

Claims about the subject:

Reflections about an ethnography of the extraordinary

The encounter with extraordinary events that question our own canons about “reality” and force ourselves to question supposed ontologies seems to be one of the more seductive expectations of the ethnographical experience, but at the same time more resisted (and repressed) by the academic anthropology.

In a certain way, from the formative movements of the disciplinary field, anthropologists have reflected about aspects of the social life of the natives connected to the “extraordinary”, categorized very quickly as magic, witchcraft, shamanism, etc (speaking about the phenomena) or as myths, folklore, survivals (speaking about the representations in the native speech). However, the sincerity or explicit reflection on account of the anthropologists themselves about the direct experience of phenomena or extraordinary or super sensible, has implied serious difficulties to some investigators.

Since a complex relationship between the empirical and the metaphysical (Oliveira en Carvalho 1993:76) was inscribed in the early formation of the anthropological knowledge (Carvalho 1993) the confrontation with the extraordinary, in the meaning of human capacities which escape from our idea of reality, has been systematically denied as a consequence of an hegemony of a scientific paradigm and positivist in the ethnographical practice and left behind by the academy towards non academic knowledge. However, some anthropologists have proposed to recover for ethnographical analysis different field experiences with the extraordinary or super sensible, as Carvalho himself with the shells oracles of xangós from Recife, Paul Stoler, Jean Favret-Saada and Carlos Castaneda with witchcraft, or Bruce Grindal with trance and resurrection.

In this preliminary approach, I will speak about my own confrontation with the events exposed above, thinking up to what point the intent of anthropological objectivity about the “extraordinary”, what without any doubt implies critical reflections about the ethnographical paradigm, can be intended from disciplinary categories, even “realist” and objectivist. Against certain tendency towards the ethnographical (self) criticism to the academic evident negation of reporting the “extraordinary” or “super sensible”, consisting of impugning the capacity of the disciplinary formation to give account of these experiences, I believe the legacy of canons, logical breaches and contradictions of the own discipline, in fact, enable perspectives for an effective anthropological analysis, more productive than those centred in the deconstruction of the ethnographic speech.

Firstly, I would like to stop in what I consider an excessive confidence in the “magical” powers of writing to conjure the silence of the events and experiences out of the canons of “reality”. Although I share the militant value of the literary critic of the ethnographic speech, both, for scientific and aesthetical reasons, I do not believe that the problem stated by the representation/analysis of the extraordinary phenomena of the field experience must be solved with priority in this instance. In some cases these approaches, which involve a rationalization – not negative- of the “unreal”, the discussion about the ethnographical representation has been put in the centre again, denying the pertinence or relevance of what has been called the “ethnographical realism”, on behalf of the suitable representation or analysis of the extraordinary.

Stoler, for example, points that the conventions of ethnographical representation limit the possibility of giving account of these phenomena: “usually we do not write what we want to write” (1989:47). Then, he praises Favret-Saada’s work (and his own) because he not only experiments with the conventions of the ethnographical realism but also challenges the “principal suppositions of the western epistemological tradition” (1989:50). Basically, to consider the topics “from the inside”, both from the native logics and rather from the subjective experience of the investigator progressively compromised in these logics; Stoler’s critical experience was when he reacted as a wizard, not as an anthropologist, facing a situation presented in the field experience (1989:46)

Stoler assures, for example, that nothing of his learning about social theory prepared him to give account of the powers of witchcraft, something that he only could do acting as a Songhay wizard. From it, he deduces that he will need in the future “to look for a different way of expression, a way in which the events become the author of the text and the writer becomes the interpreter of the event, who helps as a go-between to the readers and the event” (1989:54).

But firstly, the search of a new authorial position and certain rhetorical changes as a way to subvert the ethnographical authority, takes part in the general agenda of criticism to the ethnographical gender, which has been known as one of the hegemonic tendencies of the deconstructive anthropology. But the contemporary deconstructive criticism of the textual strategies

of construction of ethnographical authority, in spite of its epistemological radicalism, has kept intact the refusal of accepting the ethnographical encounter with the extraordinary, as it is sustained by Carvalho (1993:82).

But, Why the defended search of a “different way of expression” where the events “become the author” (that is to say, the events in a certain way write themselves) and the anthropologist is their interpreter, it should deviate from the experience of witchcraft and not, as it in fact happens, from the impact of other ethnographical experiences within the unquestionable field of the “real”?

In simplistic terms, we could wonder if the limitations attributed to ethnographical realism really are with regard to the rhetorical forms of textual expression or the types of habilitated topics, or rather to the objects it constructs, the true ways and the strategies of demonstration, proof, the methods used in the recording of information and the conditions and established procedures so that the information becomes “data”.

I prefer to introduce the distinction that Fabian (1990) establishes between literary and epistemological realism in the frame of “ethnographical realism”, so that the debate about the representation does not paralyse an effort of objectivity about the ethnographical experience with the extraordinary. Fabian suggests that the criticism to the style has frequently confused both types of realism and the experimentation with styles has looked for, in fact, more realism by means of “non realists” styles. What makes the representation difficult, “the crisis of the style” is more the false epistemological realism than the conventions of literary realism. What would prevent to represent by means of “realist” styles extraordinary experiences which defy the realist epistemologies? In fact, I believe that it is not only in discussion up to what point new ways of writing guarantee a greater approach, a new epistemology, to give account of what a realist epistemology does not admit, but also that the formation in the ethnographical paradigms, including certain gnoseologic pulsions inscribed in the ethnographical canon, have not habilitated it to construct the extraordinary as an object of investigation.

Now, why the “non realist” styles should represent better (or worse) the reality or “unreality” than the “realist” styles? Let’s take Carlos Castaneda’s Case. If we attend to *Las enseñanzas de Don Juan* –Don Juan’s Teachings— (1980 [1968]), the first and most famous book of his saga about the well known Yaki

wizard, we will remember that the rhetorical structure of the novel is not far from the typical “realist” compromises based in the literature of the XIX century for the style of the novel (and the ethnographical realism): an author who defines himself as an observer protagonist and ego-centred narrator, a true authorial Ego. The look of the western urban subject – and instructed: the scientist – about the pre-modern world, countryman, and pre-scientist. A meticulous description of the “facts”, with a language that clearly builds the space and temporal circumstances and the actantial positions. A narration which intends to demonstrate the truth and reality of the narrated, no matter how surprising it may be. And here is the basic point: The “extraordinary” events narrated by Castaneda, his intention to know them including his narration about how he gets to learn the epistemology of Don Juan to achieve his aim to be a wizard, resigning the scientific approach, do not imply that the author leaves the idea of exposing the facts in the most objective and possible way, to show the “truth” offering data from his empiric experience. The only thing that Castaneda (or rather his character-authorial Ego) seems to put in crisis of the literary realism, and only in part, is precisely its more epistemological aspect: the positivist rationalization of experience. But also here we should be careful in identifying rationalism and realism, as literary realism stands more in the proceedings of description of the sensitive experience than in offering finished rational explanations in positivist terms. This is evident in many realist novels that deal about the fantastic (let’s think in Edgar Alan Poe) or they include fantastic or “irrational” elements (Melville, Conrad, etc) without leaving realist styles, even rationalist, in description and exposition. If we went back to Castaneda, we could say that his strategy of writing consists rather of forcing a thick “realist description” of “unreal” facts.

Before rehearsing a general impugnation to the rhetorical instruments by the incapacity of “giving account of” we should recognise first that this incapacity, this lack, has been the horizon for the anthropological desire from which the force of ethnographical knowledge acts, and one of the principal values (exotism, *ostranenia*) from the disciplinary ethos: as Carvalho himself points, to confront and apprehend not only the standard difficulties – from a theoretical canon – from those cultural and social confrontations which one tries to explore, interpret, explain or translate, but also what is radically different, the inapprehensive, the unspeakable in our scientific terms, cultural or ritual, and face the frontier of the cognoscible. To name the unexpected of a field situation as something that detonates or should detonate a deep re-accommodation of our theoretical or gnoseological budgets, our way of thinking or our being in the world, it is not then, an external postulate of the ethnographical tradition.

Why not codify then the situation in terms of a conventional ethnographical scheme, and apply for example, typical categories of the anthropological theory to the interpretations of the facts? Perhaps this would be a greater proof, as much to the ethnographical representations as to the “realist” epistemologies: to intent to give account of the events and intuitions related to the extraordinary without hurrying to categorise the extraordinary phenomena within the traditional taxonomy of the theory and the ethnographical writing, as “magic”, “witchcraft”, “trance” or even “super sensible”.

The culture of the “Other”

Who attends “*the Other*” as a legitimate object of investigation? Humanism or science? Natural science or Social science?

To intent an objective account of events than do not respond in principle to the taxonomy of proper objects of a particular scientific field faces us to a first dilemma concerning with the disciplinary competence. So, without moving from the scientific disciplines (or that debate its scientific self), may they be exact, natural or social...Who should study these kind of phenomena? The physicists? The astronomers? The biologists? The anthropologists?

Let's return to our case. Without any doubt a physicist might argue his competence in the study of the properties of light and movement, probably the materiality and energy of the "objects"/found events/lived in my experience; of course that the experimentation, measurement, in controlled conditions of the different variables of analysis would present a difficult obstacle (perhaps not impossible) to save, although not so much as the main requirement which would be ontological,

and concerns to the categorization as a physical object with material properties susceptible of physical analysis to something which has not been (in principle) previously "proved" as existent, it means registered, measured, etc. Astronomers would find themselves with similar difficulties to which would be added that they should argue the relation of those objects/events with cosmic phenomena, and adapt the scale of their methodology of register and analysis. Biologists would have very similar difficulties related to experimentation, measurement, register, ontological validation, to what is added the requirement of associating the phenomena related to living beings.

Humanistic disciplines and social sciences, further than the exotic thing that these levels could result to the majority of their practitioners, would find less problems in the moment of legitimate the approach: A historian would not have greater problems than to make a fool of himself if he investigated different oral and written sources and articulated not only a temporal organization of the information that describes analogue events and objects, in a period of time, a region, determined social groups, etc, but interpreted the impact, the value, the social and cultural effects of them; of course, he should decide if the descriptions are about real facts, if they are mythical or religious constructions, cultural representations, etc. As for a psychologist, it is possible he had some interest in determining the characteristics of these events in psychic representations, or assuming the "real" character of the objects, study the effects of the "contact" of the eventual witnesses.

It is very difficult for anthropology to be able to claim an eminent competence about the study of the objects in themselves, as it is not evident that they are "human" phenomena. But as far as they take part of the collective experience, although we classify them as "representations", an anthropologist can study with total legitimacy these phenomena as cultural dynamic of the social actors without the need of taking no other effort of validation of the factual events. Now: if those "events" are incorporated in the own ethnographical experience of the anthropologist and they do not belong any more exclusively to the natives' speech, the value given to observation or the field experience as authority of the ethnographical knowledge, it opens the possibility of interrogation about those events as reality, besides its social and cultural elaboration, including as a phenomenon linked to the actors' practices, in the way that Stoler and Carvalho argue, as for "expansion of human capacities" or "ultra sensible" phenomena.

One of the topics about which Stoler and Carvalho elaborate their criticism to the positivist repression/realist objectivist of the extraordinary, is in the academic reject to consider "extraempiric", "ultrasensible" phenomena (Carvalho 1993:76), or accessible by non-physiological

senses. I consider this as one of the weaknesses in Carvalho's argumentation, as in Stoler's: to equalize extraordinary with "ultrasensible" or "extraempiric". In fact, the intent of rescue of the phenomena which are not "observable" or not even able to be "smelled", "heard", "tasted" or "touched" for the ethnographical analysis, leads to not considering adequately the possibility that many events or objects (rather "objective" potentials) extraordinary in the field experience may manifest a strictly "empiric" character, and be analysed from the platform. Differently from Carvalho and Stoler I prefer not to taxonomy my field experiences as a contact with neither "ultrasensible" nor extraempiric phenomena since they were mediated by a plentiful sensorial activity.

The main problem would not stand so much, or not only, in the difficulty of the perception of the events linked to the extraordinary, but in its objectification with the purpose of the production of knowledge. As

Carvalho affirms "...everything happens as if suddenly, in the moment when the anthropologist finally finds what he was looking for- a signal in the native's experience, in an extension of his own human capacities- he does not know what to do with it any more. It means, he no longer accepts it as a legitimate object of study" (Carvalho 1993:82).

But a very different spectrum of investigation opens if we consider, as in our case, the possibility that the ethnographer is the witness of events that without decaying from "ultra sensible" levels, are extraordinary and cannot be classified but also broadly observed and would allow its objectification on account of the observer focusing his empiricism.

But, why the pertinence of anthropology and not other fields of knowledge to introduce or construct those phenomena as susceptible objects to be investigated? We could start watching the difficulty of classifying totally from an ontological point of view, as own of a determined order of being, and we could not assure either it deals or not of elements linked to human or not human capacities, natural or artificial, biological or not, physical or not. It is not difficult either to appreciate the difficulty of classifying them, even in the most epistemological sense, as a proper object of a determined sphere of knowledge. However, I sustain that Anthropology is in condition to demand its approach to these phenomena, habilitated inclusively from certain principles of the disciplinary canon.

In the first place, in a practical scientific sense, different from the epistemological and methodological limitations of natural and exact sciences to legitimate its objectification and validation in these types of events, the quantitative character of the ethnographical observation, with all its positivist corset, allows to verify as empiric "reality" what the ethnographer observed without any other means of register than his field notes. If we introduce this experience into the ethnographical authority given by the "to be there" of the anthropologist, his inclusion as legitimate object of the order of reality, it is sustainable even in the center of an ethnographical frame of positivist slope. On the other hand, as a rendezvous with the objectivist exigencies and different from the "supersensitive" events, we must add the fact that we do not deal here with extraempirical phenomena but perfectly contrasting with the physiological senses. Besides, although it may not be legitimate to assure limitedly that the events which I am speaking about are linked to human capacities, it is possible to affirm, so I want to demonstrate, that the events and relieved objects responded to certain regularities and diversities that may be interpreted as actions, behaviours, more than "natural" events of a purely physical order. These "behaviours" may be better understood as originated by sensitive dispositions, instinctive or voluntary, or product of an intelligent programme, and not as properties of unanimated objects.

Now, if we can use provisionally the category "behaviour", it is not possible to affirm that those behaviours are exteriorisations of living beings in the way that Biology or Natural Science defines them. So, biology would require a contrast impossible to do by the simple circumstantial observation of the described phenomena. Here is where an ethnographical approach orientated from a paradigm of cultural behaviour would allow an approximation to the phenomena even without contrasting the biological character of the objects. It is the same criterion with which can be considered manifestations of culture to inanimate objects but material (the "material culture"), or also they can be animated thanks to human action (programming, automatism).

As an anthropologist, the first thing I asked to myself when watching that the observed objects had a diversified, complex behaviour and with irregularities, was if we could think or interpret those behaviours starting from categories of cultural or social analysis. Really: starting from the perceptions of the specific, recurrent and differenced "behaviours" we could speculate about the possibly cultural character of the phenomena/objects starting from concepts as social interaction, communication, abstraction/symbolization, perception, adaptation.

I propose then, that it is viable an essay of “culturization” of “the Other”. Of course, if I succeeded in this proposal we would be facing a real revolution of the anthropological paradigm which would imply to admit that culture is not only a phenomenon of the human praxis. For this, it is necessary to suspend an anthropocentric projection in the objectification of “the Other” that associates “culture” to “humanity”. The risk of ethnocentrism inherent to the relation with the Other cultural human, takes a risk of anthropocentrism in the relation with the Other cultural not necessarily human. (which evidences once more the relative character of the ethnographical otherness).

Really: from the reading of my own description of the meeting with the “lights”, it can be thought that these experiences caused a displacement in the position of the ethnographical Other. While my initial “other”, my ethnographical object was represented initially by my native companions in the crossing, the confrontation with extraordinary phenomena described, and necessity of consenting explanations and attitudes in front of it, it finished introducing a new distinction between a “We” that sums with all the differences, to the ethnographer and his previous “others”, in front of “the” Other, a new Other that emerges as “really” radical.

How can the “culture” of The Other be boarded?

Firstly, I need to explain again that this is a very preliminary essay that pretends to sketch a scope of investigation more than completing a study. So, I will limit myself to present what I believe are ethnographical perspectives applicable to our object.

On the one hand, we have the possibility to incorporate to the analysis the history of those phenomena and the interpretations of different social actors on them. This could be complemented with the objectification of the interpretations of the actors about the events, replacing the cultural contexts that inform them. To do this, we can start for example, from the descriptions of the local actors from whom I have several recorded registers, previous to my own experience. Then, in the regional literature and other documentary sources we find analogous descriptions, which sometimes have been lived by the narrators themselves. Of course, in each case we can attend to the order of the representations and the native theories as to the reconstruction of the “factuality” of the events in different times and places. Here it is necessary to attend to the contradictions among epistemological and cultural frames of the narrators, inclusive to the skeptical influence of paradigms of disciplines that board the “fantastic” narrations as folklore¹.

On the other hand, the confrontation of interpretations and representations could continue, in a more reflexive sense, analysing my own experience from the own impulses of objectification/categorization of the extraordinary, my companions’ and mine, as different cultural practices or shared with those who in the first moment were the “others” of my ethnography.

But the principal point I want to defend is that we can also intent an analytical approach to my own field experience, playing with the possibility of constructing ethnographical “data” from the extraordinary

¹ The Argentine folklorist-historian Draghi Lucero, in his novel “La Cabra de Plata (The Silver Goat), 1978, gives a description of his encounter with “la luz mala” (The bad light): the protagonist, a historian and folklorist doctor (the author’s alter ego) who as an old man shelters himself away from modern life, is round a campfire with woodcutters when one of them talks about “la luz mala” (the ghost of a murdered man) that appears in a certain place. The doctor “as a scientist” cannot convince the audience that it is a fluorescence produced by organic matters in decay. The woodcutter invites him to see it and when arriving at the place he sees or “believes” to see a “floating light that seemed to swim in the breeze, as if it came nearer...”(143). After running away in terror “in a new resignation of being” because of which “he descended centuries, millennia of shivers in a total resignation of his culture”(144) the professor faces an epistemological and social dilemma : “What explanation should I give to my colleagues in the University?” “Humanity marched during millennia through a magical world... in spite of the new science that submits everything...Do not mix with the taboos : “guarda e passa”-as Alighieri said. There are phenomena that must be watched from far away...Follow your routine path and you will be free from ridiculous things like the one you have just done. You, who for your culture and current attitudes belong to the antifolk , you introduced yourself as an intruder, to the hidden substance of Folklore”.(146)

experiences intending to make them objective. This construction could start with the description of the “Other” applying different categories of social and cultural analysis. For example: we could say that the described objects kept a series of behaviour, differenced but with regularities, integrating a sequence. Of course, this description does not take into consideration what is not observable, or possible oblivions, or the impossibility to register possible ways of manifestation. This supposition of unobservable or clearly perceptible manifestations can derive as conclusion of a series of incongruence in our perception, as the breaches in the relation space-time, or the “amnesia” about events that logically should have happened (lights that reach us reiterated numerous? times, which we do not remember when they went away).

A first classification of the observed or observable behaviours of the objects that take our interest may be the following:

1. Appearance, approximation movements and repeated disappearances up to a distance of a hundred metres.
2. Quick movement in the air, bounces in different directions, and return to the turning point in less than a second
3. Interval without manifestation.
4. Very slow approximation from twenty or thirty kilometres to a distance of fifteen metres and equivalent retreat; with chromatic changes from white-greenish to orange-reddish; important increase in the size of the objects; luminous contact.
5. Appearance and approximation of a similar object simultaneously with the final stage of approximation of the former object, with following of traces and equivalent chromatic changes, though with a quick disappearance.
6. Interval with the only manifestation of a long-lasting retreat of the luminous object up to twenty or thirty kilometres.
7. Appearance and displacement of lights over the Pampa del Leoncito, chromatic changes, shape changes, simultaneous relative formation among the three objects, detection of traces (prints) at a great distance, flight and disappearance in the air of one of the objects.
8. Flight and direct approximation up to zero distance with regard to us (several times) of a red luminous object apparently of low density.
9. Reappearance of the third light in the Pampa del Leoncito and then a set of luminous signals in static position.

From this classification we can affirm that in the events 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, there were evidences of interactions of the objects with our group: The approximation movements show at least some kind of recognition or acknowledge of our presence and orientation of their behaviour with regard to our own movements. These interactions fulfilled different patterns and they also implied transformations of the behaviour along with the succession of events, which were solved by progressive approximations to lesser distances and for more prolonged times.

Perhaps it seems hasty to classify as “social” the interactions with the described objects, at least in the meaning applied to human behaviour. However, it could hardly be questioned the social character as a general category, in the way it can be applied to the behaviour of certain living species. Really, the interactions implied in some cases factors of collective organization of the objects, such as coordinated approximation of two of the objects at the same time (5) and coordination of their movements (7, 9). But we should add another component: the existence of communication phenomena among the objects and with regard to our group.

In event 9 we have a period of no less than fifteen minutes during which the luminous objects made in unison bright signals located in a triangular formation, covering the extremes of the Pampa.

Apparently the luminous signals were interpreted by the objects: that is to say, taking in account more than the simple emission, the reception of the others, evidenced because the three objects began to send flashes in a brief succession until doing it simultaneously. If this affirmation were right, we could risk as a hypothesis that the behaviour of the objects includes the symbolic function; they are able to express themselves by means of a code which implies the capacity of abstraction, displacement and representation, that is to say, the substitution of an object by another that represents it, by means of shared signs.

It would also be possible to apply to this event a scheme of communication emitter-message-receiver, where we could decipher their language that is conveyed the luminous signals. This leads us to another question, consisting in how the objects not only emit but also perceive the luminous signals. Is it a natural property, as the organs of the senses or the photosynthetic cells? Is it a technological capacity, the same as a photoelectrical cell?

In the first case, we would be in front of a proof of the biological character of the objects. In the second case, we would be in front of a proof of their cultural character, further than the confirmation if the objects themselves are a technological product or if they are living beings with technological developments in use.

But turning to the concepts of social interaction and communication applied to the events and objects of reference, we failed to praise the phenomena of communication among the objects and our group. Really, we can also propose that this type of communication (and then the social interaction) was also given in the events 5 and 7. In the first case we have the tracing of prints at night by one of the objects. That behaviour not only implies the recognition of traces of our previous presence in a place, but also the recognition that those traces organized in succession, represented a previous sequence of movements. In case 7, such recognition seems to have taken place with regard to the traces of our journey in the Pampa. In both cases (5 and 7) it can be applied, as we said for the events of communication among the objects, the question for the biological or technological origin of this capacity of perception. If we accepted a biological source, we could suppose that this perception is quite a developed capacity, either it is “visual” or any other type: we could admit that we are facing a visual capacity, this is a perception based in the detection of luminous effects on the bodies (in concordance with the perception of luminous signals which we have already analysed), or in front of non-visual capacity (as smell or touch) which allows to recognise prints on the ground starting from the contact with an organ. Finally, we could also suppose a perception of auditory type as the orientation mechanisms in the bat, which is based in the bouncing of sound emissions on the surface of physical bodies. We could also think hypothetically about a capacity of perception given by a determined technology, which makes us value our pondering to the cultural character of the objects.

Anyway, not only in this but also in other manifestation of communication, we may think in the presence of two components more of the social action: intentional character and rationality. Rationality would be at first given by the repeated patterns of behaviour in relation with the interaction with our group, following at least a (discernible) logic, the one with approximation and contact with us, the detection and following of our activity. Intention, even it is not prerogative of every behaviour (in a biological sense) is deductible (detectable?) in every communication phenomenon as the one we have tried to describe. The presence of an intention of communicating a determined message would be present at least in the exchange of signals observed among the objects. With regard to non strictly “communicative” actions, as the approximation movements, maybe we can suppose a verified intentional character because of the control over the degree of approximation of the objects towards us, which was slow and complex but showed varied strategies.

In conclusion, we would be happy now with having constructed and confronted in a preliminary way the hypothesis that the Other, in this case the objects-events experimented in my field work, can be analysed in terms of culture, basically showing the applicability of a communicational scheme, the verification of phenomena of interaction that can be qualified probably as “social” and specially specifically observation of phenomena which point to the presence of the symbolic function and rationality in the communicative behaviour of the objects.

It is greater, of course, the field of what it leaves out of this preliminary analysis: the existence of incongruence in our perception; if the observation of many more luminous manifestations, as variations of intensity, density and colour, in situations of approximation or at a distance, the speedy movements respond to means of communication which we do not understand yet; the recurrence of determined native explanations of similar events that are recorded in our registers; and the final doubt: if my perception or capacities and the proper observation-experimentation that I narrate have been aleatory or have been habilitated by a certain epistemological and perceptual preparation (not conscious in the whole) product of the previous field experiences, which allowed me to be witness or interlocutor of the Other.

Finally, can we propose as a general hypothesis that the observed objects, which we could not assimilate to a technology or natural or cultural known object, are not “natural” phenomena but social and cultural , though not necessarily human?

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Definitions of some terms used in the text

Page 10: Ontologism: from ontology, a term or sub area from Philosophy, which refers to the criteria or conceptual devices about the substance of the things of the world.

Page 13 and 14: Gnoseologic: From gnoseology. A term or sub discipline from Philosophy, that refers to the intellectual and perceptual operations carried by human beings to construct or produce knowledge about reality

Page 14: Actantial position: A linguistic term that indicates the marks, in a text or discourse, of the subject positions represented in a social or group interaction from the narrator point of view: namely the “I”, the “you”, “they” etc,