

**New Visions of the Past: Reinterpretations of History in the Novel and  
Cinema of Contemporary Venezuela**

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**Jose Antonio Rodriguez**

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Requirements

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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The contemporary history of Venezuela is characterized by a series of socio-political crises rooted in ill-defined notions of nation, state and national identity that can be traced all the way back to colonial times and the founding of the nation in the early nineteenth century. In a major cultural movement, many novels and films have appeared in the last three decades examining key periods of the Venezuelan past. This Ph.D. dissertation analyzes two novels (*La Luna de Fausto* by Francisco Herrera Luque and *Lope de Aguirre, Príncipe de la Libertad* by Miguel Otero Silva) and two films (*Orinoko Nuevo Mundo* by Diego Rísquez and *Jericó* by Luis Alberto Lamata) that give to a general public a new perspective on the discovery and conquest of Venezuela by Spain in the sixteenth century. An analysis of relevant texts (chronicles, history books, personal letters, poems, etc) from this time period, which provided the main background for the novels and films under study, indicates that a mixture of reality and fiction was used to create an official discourse that supported the process of colonization, privileging direct descendants of the European conquistadors and neglecting Native Americans. In their adventures through Venezuela, the European explorers created a colonial discourse that shows the bright and dark sides of the Renaissance man with a shift in the idea of America as a marvelous land to the literature of *desengaño*. The diverse texts and films analyzed in this study indicate that our vision of the past is constantly changing. It varies from person to person. It was highly subjective in the sixteenth century and it is highly subjective nowadays. Thus, the writers and film directors that created the novels and films under study dealt with the past in their own terms. Using multiple strategies, the two novels and two films examined show a complex colonization process that had a negative impact on the colonized and the colonizers. They attack the idea of a superior European culture, challenging an official history which justifies a dominant white male elite and sets women and non-white people in the periphery of society.

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PREVIEW

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## **Introduction**

PREVIEW

## History, fiction and Venezuelan identity

Our vision of the past is constantly changing. This PhD dissertation will analyze two novels (*La Luna de Fausto* by Francisco Herrera Luque and *Lope de Aguirre, Príncipe de la Libertad* by Miguel Otero Silva) and two films (*Orinoko Nuevo Mundo* by Diego Rísquez and *Jericó* by Luis Alberto Lamata) that use different approaches to interpret or re-interpret the process of discovery and colonization of Venezuela by Spain. In 1968, the Venezuelan writer Adriano González León published his famous novel *País Portátil* in which he shows a country full of historical contradictions<sup>1</sup> where there was a clear need to redefine basic socio-political structures (González León, 1969). In a more recent book, *Las Crisis de la Venezuela Contemporánea: 1903-1992*, historian Manuel Caballero sees the history of Venezuela in the twentieth century as a series of several crises, many of them rooted in ill-defined notions of nation, state and national identity that can be traced all the way back to colonial times and the founding of the nation in the early nineteenth century (Caballero, 2006). In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson analyzes the case of Venezuela as the typical example of a nation that did not exist and was imagined by a dominant elite (Anderson, 2006). In 1805-1810, the male creole elite of Venezuela imagined a country in which most of the existing population, women and non-white people in the lower castes, were not real citizens and were put directly under their control.

The members of the creole elite were the direct descendants of the Spanish

---

<sup>1</sup> In a interview discussing his novel, González León states: “El nombre lo descubrí una vez concluida la novela, porque me di cuenta que habíamos sido portátiles durante grandes trechos de nuestra historia. Alquilados por Carlos V a los banqueros alemanes llamados Weltzars, arrendados en el siglo XVIII a los comerciantes vascos de la Compañía Guipuzcoana y entregados después a la voracidad de las empresas petroleras internacionales.” <http://www.sololiteratura.com/adrianogonzalezleon.htm>

conquistadors or explorers who in the sixteenth century came to Venezuela in the search of mythical regions such as the Earth Paradise, El Dorado or the Kingdom of the Amazons (Pardo, 1988). For these sixteenth-century Spaniards, a properly ordered society was hierarchical, with power, wealth, and status all concentrated at the top. The conquerors founded cities and towns, divided the country land among them, and dominated the native, becoming their masters. They neither believed in human equality nor had any enthusiasm for promoting social mobility. Attitudes that eventually have determined the socio-political structure of Venezuela up to end of the twentieth century. An official history was created to justify a dominant position of the male creole elite. The literature and the visual arts of the nineteenth century were very active in this process. A book like *Venezuela Heroica* (Eduardo Blanco, 1881) and the paintings of Martín Tovar y Tovar (*Batalla de Carabobo*, *Firma del Acta de la Independencia*, *Simón Bolívar*,



**Figure 1.** *Firma del Acta de la Independencia* (1877), Martín Tovar y Tovar



**Figure 2.** *Bolivar, Sinfonia Tropikal* (1981), Diego Rísquez.

*Boyaca, Batalla de Junín, Batalla de Ayacucho*, Cristóbal Rojas (*La Muerte de Girardot en Bárbula*) and Arturo Michelena (*Miranda en la Carraca, Vuelvan Caras, Muerte de Antonio José de Sucre en Berruecos*) highlight the sacrifices of the male creole elite in the foundation of the nation without showing any of the social or political inequalities that existed inside the country and contributed to the national crises of the twentieth century.

In the second half of the twentieth century, movies like *Bolivar, Sinfonia Tropikal* (Figure 2) and *Manuela Sáenz* questioned the motivations behind the Independence process and the role of the male creole elite. Many Venezuelan writers (Laura Antillano,

Luis Britto García, Adriano González León, Francisco Herrera Luque, Miguel Otero Silva, Denzil Romero, Ana Teresa Torres, Arturo Uslar Pietri) and film directors (Diego Rísquez, Michael New, Luis Alberto Lamata, Luis Armando Roche, John Petrizzelli, Cezary Jeworski) focused their work in revisiting the history of Venezuela and challenging the myths created by the official history that offered a distorted vision of the past (Britto García, 1999). In a major cultural movement, a very large number of novels (> 15) and films (9) were produced that reexamined key periods of the Venezuelan past. Thus, in a bold attempt, literature and cinema have been used to fill gaps and deconstruct myths in the history that common people know.<sup>2</sup> Novels and films can work within the apparatus of mass culture reaching people in ways that are not accessible to academic history. They are perhaps the best tools for changing popular notions of history or to point to the myths inside the official history (Menton, 1993; Rosenstone, 2006).

The dissertation contains three major sections which deal with important issues associated with the conquest and colonization by Spain of the region today known as Venezuela (Figure 3):

- I) Revisiting the myths associated with the discovery and first contact: *Orinoko Nuevo Mundo*.
- II) The Welser, the sword and the cross in the conquest of Venezuela: *La Luna de Fausto* and *Jericó*.
- III) Lope de Aguirre, *desengaño* and rebellion: *Lope de Aguirre, Príncipe de la Libertad*

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Joaquin Soler Serrano (*Mis Personajes Favoritos*), Francisco Herrera Luque explained his views on the close connection between fiction and history, mentioning: “No soporto las leyendas que han hecho de la historia de Venezuela ... una historia arregladita con una serie de mentiras ... mi obra es liberar al venezolano del pasado, que vea claramente el presente ... el venezolano es un pueblo que conoce mal su historia, y para ver hacia adelante hay que conocerla para desacerse de ella.” VHS, Fundación Cinemateca Nacional, Caracas, 1984.





**Figure 3.** Map from colonial times showing the provinces of Venezuela, Paria, Cumana and Nova Andaluçia. Nowadays, all of them form Venezuela as a country.

Each section will compare past and present views of a particular episode in the history of Venezuela. These views will be connected to old and current views of identity and the actual role of the conquistadors and white creole elite in the foundation of the nation. In all sections, I will pay particular attention to the interplay between fiction and history. Texts from cronistas, poets, and historians from the sixteenth century (*Historia Indiana* by Nicolas Federmann, personal letters from Philipp von Hutten and Lope de Aguirre, *Recopilacion Historial de Venezuela* by Pedro de Aguado, *Elegías de Varones Ilustres de Indias* by Juan de Castellanos, *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* by Bartolome de Las Casas, etc ) will also be examined looking for issues involving ideology, race and gender during the conquest and colonization process. These



colonial texts illustrate how a mixture of reality and fiction was used to create an official history that colonized the memories of the Venezuelan past. Furthermore, as we will see in several chapters of this dissertation, these texts clearly show that there were different attitudes and ideologies on how to approach the colonization process.

### **The boundaries between history and fiction**

As we will see in Parts I-III of this dissertation, the texts from the sixteenth century used to create parts of the official history of Venezuela contain a substantial amount of fiction. Since the limits between history and fiction are already ill defined, it is valid to attack the official history using works of fiction. However, there are problems associated with the representation of history in novels and films (Alvaray, 2004 and 2013; Menton, 1993; Rosenstone, 2006; Stevens, 2005). Can the identity of a nation be re-imagined through a continuous dialogue between fiction and history? What are the boundaries between fiction, history and identity? These are more than academic questions when one takes into consideration the way in which the identity of Venezuela was created through a mixture of historical facts and fictional myths (Caballero, 2006).

The relationship between history and fiction has always been close but problematic (Southgate, 2009). Since classical antiquity a deliberate attempt was made to distinguish between these two genres. For many ancient writers the main object of history was truth, In principle, histories were narratives of “real facts”. This traditional view was reinforced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when modern historians took science as an appropriate model for their craft (Braudy, 1970). The broad popularity of historical fiction and the novel in the nineteenth century caused historians to seek recognition of

their field as a serious “science”. Many historians believed that, to be scientific, historical studies had to avoid any form of artistic writing or imaginative literature (Braudy, 1970). History has to do with “facts”, with what is “true”, and “truth” is the only appropriate goal for any historian. History was then defined as the opposite of fiction. As a definition this is fine, but as Voltaire writes, ‘History is the recital of facts represented as true. Fable, on the other hand, is the recital of facts represented as fiction’. Indeed, many texts of history generated during the Age of Discovery, when an ideological apparatus was being built to justify the conquest and colonization of the New World (Adorno, 2008; Mignolo, 2003), contain a lot of fiction. Furthermore, when examining in Part II of this dissertation the process of creation of the novels *La Luna de Fausto* and *Los Amos del Valle* by Francisco Herrera Luque or the movie *Jericó* by Luis Alberto Lamanta, one finds a meticulous attention to the reproduction of known facts from the past that makes these works of fiction more reliable than some historical texts written in the sixteenth century during the conquest and colonization of Venezuela.

History and fiction are concerned with the construction of meaning, making sense of the chaotic data associate with human lives. The construction of narratives is essential in this respect. Historians would argue that their task is to reconstruct a story that is already there – a story that is inherent in the past, awaiting their retrieval. Accordingly, if the historian listens and acts carefully, the material will begin to speak through him. This would lead to continuity between historical reality and historical narrative. In practical terms, it is impossible to remove fiction from historical narratives (Munslow, 2007; White, 1978). In both cases the act of representation involves the creation of a narrative that reflects the views or ideas of its author. When comparing historical and fictional

narratives, Hayden White notes that the former are quite manifestly “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found” (White, 1978). The past is “real” enough (it happened), but what we make of that past – the narrative that we adopt to explain and adopt it – is up to us. Although there are historical facts, history is itself “a construct of the mind.” For a given fact in the past, there can be many interpretations by historians, showing that no history, whether within a novel or a history text, can be without bias (White, 1978). In other words, for both the novelist and historian, meaning lies not in a chain of events themselves but in the writer's interpretation of what occurred (Mallon, 1992). On the basis of this, it is always valid for a novel or film to challenge the content of a historical text.

Historian and film analyst Robert Rosenstone has rejected that idea of the historian as the sole guardian of the historical truth (Rosenstone 2007). For him, the once impregnable position of the historian as superior to the novelist is just another social construction. After comparing the traditional presentation of history in text and new presentations on film, he concludes (Rosenstone 2006):

History does not exist until it is created. And we create it in terms of our underlying values. Our kind of rigorous, “scientific” history is in fact a product of history, our special history which includes a particular relation to the written word, a rationalized economy, notions of individual rights, and the nation state, and many cultures have done quite well without it.  
(p. 43)

The impact of postmodernist ideas upon historical study has been extensive (Rosenstone 2007; Southgate, 2009). In the context of historiography, postmodernism implies a challenge to those conventional certainties – such as “facts”, “objectivity” and “truth” – in terms of which much history was in the past written and read. The skeptical approach of postmodernist theorists questions the absolute validity of such concepts. It

concludes that there can never be one single privileged position from which the story of the past can be told. It provokes questions of what the historian's language represents: whether there is a correspondence with a past reality or whether what is presented is just an internally consistent system constructed from and for a specific point of view (Mallon, 1992; Munslow, 2007; Southgate, 2009). The novel *Lope de Aguirre, Príncipe de la Libertad* and the film *Orinoko Nuevo Mundo*, under study in this project, adopt a postmodernist approach which allows them to question the official history and bring back the voices of marginal groups (Indians, Blacks, women). The removal of "objective truth" as a meaningful goal is counterbalanced by a perceived need for many different accounts of the past – none claiming any special privilege, but each providing some illumination from its own perspective (Alvaray, 2004; Mallon, 1992; Southgate, 2009).

### **History and the conquest and colonization of the New World**

In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Walter Mignolo argues that the lettered word was an instrument used by the Europeans for the conquest and colonization of America in the sixteenth century (Mignolo, 2003), an idea shared by many experts in this area of study (Adorno, 2011; Todorov, 1982). In 1492, the same year in which Columbus discovered the New World, Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar of the Castilian Language. This grammar played a central role in the consolidation of the national identity of Spain. Nebrija, a pioneer man of letters credited with introducing the Italian Renaissance into Spain, articulated a philosophy of writing based on the celebration of the letter as the characteristic sign of the civilized man and the interactions between alphabetic writing and the recording of history. Thus, only civilized nations were able to write their history. People without letters were thought as people without history,

and oral narratives were looked at as incoherent and inconsistent. This view made the Europeans superior beings and put Native Americans at a serious disadvantage. Many Indian nations or tribes had writing without letters. They used a figurative writing language (Figure 4) and had their own way of organizing and recording knowledge (images on wood or rock walls). Most Spaniards did not understand these forms



**Figure 4.** Codices Mayas

of cultural expression. Christian friars and priest attempted to record the memories and histories from the Native Americans and were forced to introduce a tool (alphabetic writing) and discursive frames (Renaissance genres) that were alien to the cultures of the New World. These European historians had in mind a rhetoric, oratory and Christian ethic that in many cases were in conflict with the basic foundations of the native culture (Mignolo, 2003). Movies like *Orinoko Nuevo Mundo* and *Amerika Terra Incognita* by

Diego Rísquez use images as their main tool to re-examine history and compare European and Native American myths.

Images were also used to tell the history of the conquest of the New World. Felipe Huaman Poma de Ayala (1535-1616) was a Quechua noble man that chronicled the days of Spanish domination in the Andes. His illustrated chronicle, *Nueva Corónica y Buen*



**Figure 5.** Line drawing from *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (~ 1615), Felipe Huaman Poma de Ayala

*Gobierno*, combined text in Spanish and Quechua with fine line drawings. When preparing his chronicle, Huaman Poma probably felt that the lettered word was not enough to describe and convey the facts and decided to use also images (Figure 5), combining an old tradition in his native culture and European drawing patterns. As we will discuss in the next section of this dissertation, some of the images of Huaman Poma,



showing the violent behavior of the conquistadors and their lust for gold, were recreated in the film *Orinoko Nuevo Mundo*. On the other side of the Atlantic, Theodor de Bry (1528-1598) created a large number of engraved illustrations depicting early European expeditions to the New World. De Bry never traveled to America. To make his engravings, he relied on texts and paintings created by people that made the journey. Today, historians, geographers and archeologist believe that de Bry distorted reality to produce many of the images that appear in his engravings. The distortion helped to sell the engravings to a general public that was avid for news about America. The engravings were a point of reference for many Europeans. De Bry's depictions of the Spanish atrocities described by Bartolomé de Las Casas in his *Breve Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (for an example, see Figure 6) had a tremendous influence in spreading the Black Legend of Spain. The myths and truths of de Bry play an important role in *La Luna*



**Figure 6.** *Spanish atrocities in the New World* (~1590), Theodor de Bry

*de Fausto, Jericó and Orinoko Nuevo Mundo.*

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474 o 1484 – 1566) published his *Breve Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* in 1552. One of the sections of the book focuses on the abuses of the Spanish and German conquistadors in Venezuela. Las Casas lived in Venezuela, in the region of Cumana, from 1520-1521 when he attempted to establish a new model of colony where the indigenous population could live in harmony with the Europeans. Hostile Indians attacked the colony and Las Casas project collapsed. The region was frequently raided by slave hunters, who took Indians to Nueva Cadiz de Cubagua, and as a result the native population did not trust Las Casas and his fellow priests. Nueva Cadiz de Cubagua was one of the first major cities established by the Spaniards in South America (Otte, 1977). In an island without water and vegetation, Cubagua, a city was built to extract pearls from the ocean. Nueva Cadiz de Cubagua was famous all over Europe due to the high quality of its pearls and the inhuman conditions used to extract them from the ocean. Hundreds of Indian slaves were brought from Tierra Firme (mainland of Venezuela) to carry out the extraction of the pearls. Most of them died in Cubagua. In his *Historia de Las Indias*, Bartolome de Las Casas mentions Nueva Cadiz as the place of evil and uses it as an example of the extreme oppression of the Indians by the Spanish conquistadors.

One text from the sixteenth century that deserves special mention due to its influence is the *Recopilación Historial de Venezuela* by Fray Pedro de Aguado. This book is considered to be the first history text in Venezuelan historiography (Moron, 1957). Pedro de Aguado, a Spanish Franciscan friar living in Bogotá, wrote it between 1570-1580 on his own initiative feeling that the history of the conquest and colonization