

Alexander von Humboldt's *Kosmos*: indexing it

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Translated from the German by Christine Shuttleworth

September 2004 saw the publication, as part of the Humboldt Project, of the first complete editions in German of the *Vues des Cordillères et Monumens des Peuples Indigènes de l'Amérique (1810–13)* and the original version of *Kosmos (1845–62)*. The index to *Kosmos* was prepared after Humboldt's death by Eduard Buschmann, and therefore (and because of its length – its 1,145 pages making it perhaps the longest index in literary history) is available only on the Web. But the published works shed important light on Alexander von Humboldt's understanding of the role of an index. This paper seeks to develop what one might call the poetics and aesthetics of the index as perceived by him, and in so doing fully justifies Buschmann's description of Humboldt's index entries as 'little works of art'.

In September 2004, two major works by the German scientist and travel writer Alexander von Humboldt were published in Germany. The first, *Ansichten der Kordilleren und Monumente der eingeborenen Völker Amerikas*,¹ had never been published before in German. The second, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*,² was now being published for the first time in its entirety in one volume, following its author's original text. *Ansichten der Kordilleren . . .* is a travel book written in French and published between 1810 and 1813 in Paris, which documents an expedition through America's Spanish colonies from 1799 to 1804. With an unusual combination of 69 plates and related essays, Alexander von Humboldt examines, from various perspectives and in different contexts, the cultures and natural environments of the indigenous peoples of the so-called 'New World'. Humboldt died in 1859 in Berlin, in his ninetieth year; *Kosmos* is his last book, written in German and published in five volumes in Stuttgart and Tübingen between 1845 and 1862. In this work, Humboldt undertakes a description, daring both in aesthetic and scientific terms, of the whole world, the whole of nature, including the heavens as well as the earth. It not only considers contemporary conditions, but also takes into account historical developments. It aims at being neither too general nor too specific, and rather than losing itself in theoretical speculation or in specialist details, attempts to portray the great whole together with all its implications, with the aid of the knowledge and methods of all available disciplines, and in a form which possesses great aesthetic qualities. This 'crazy' idea, as Alexander von Humboldt confided to a friend, had been conceived as an imaginary journey through the universe, taking its starting-point among its most distant mists, and travelling through the most varied areas of knowledge on its way to the stones and mosses of earth, to animals and humans.³

Humboldt's *Kosmos* was an extraordinary success. A total of at least 87,000 copies were sold of the individual volumes of the first edition (with successive reprints). In the course of the 19th century the book acquired the status of a 'bible' of the educated middle classes.⁴ Since then, the publishing history of all the works of its Berlin-born author has been characterized by a plethora of adapted and incomplete editions.⁵ A new edition, the so-called *Kleinoktav* or 'pocket edition', of the first four volumes of *Kosmos* was published by Humboldt's former collaborator Eduard Buschmann, before the first edition had even been exhausted (1858–60). Buschmann undertook some alterations and 'corrections', and claimed to have produced an 'improved' edition. In 1869, for the centenary of Humboldt's birth, the firm of Cotta brought out an anniversary version of this 'pocket edition'. A new 'pocket edition' of 1870 included the fragmentary final volume. This was followed by a further edition in 1874 with a change of title, another in 1877, and another reprint in 1889. A one-volume 'American Jubilee Edition' (in German) was published in 1869 in Philadelphia, where the first three volumes had appeared in one volume as early as 1855. Abridged versions of *Kosmos* appeared in the following sequence: *Kosmos für Schulen und Laien* ('*Kosmos* for schools and laymen'), published by Karl Gustav Reuschle (Stuttgart 1848, second edition 1850); *Humboldts Kosmos*, by Paul Schettler (Stuttgart 1905); Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos*, by R. H. Francé (Leipzig 1910–11); Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, by Wilhelm Bölsche (Berlin 1913); Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Für die Gegenwart bearbeitet von Hanno Beck* ('adapted for the present day by Hanno Beck') (Stuttgart 1978); and the first two volumes of the *Kleinoktav* edition in the so-called study edition, again edited by Hanno Beck: Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos*:

Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung (Darmstadt 1993).

The Frankfurt edition of 2004 represents the first complete edition since the 19th century, and the first complete new edition ever of Humboldt's original text. For the first time, *Kosmos* has been edited exactly as it was written and published by its author. In other words, only the text actually written by Humboldt has been used. Corrections and additions made by the author, noted in the volumes that appeared during his lifetime, have been carried out or retained. Corrections added subsequently, and additions by other authors from the posthumous fifth volume, have however not been implemented or inserted.⁶ The starting-point was the very first edition,⁷ the standard being the text created by the author himself. This edition offers for the first time Humboldt's original, unadulterated *Kosmos*. Humboldt's most famous book is actually united here in one volume: 'the whole world in one book'.

'Death deprived this work of its great author before its completion.' These are the opening words of a note by Eduard Buschmann that follows the final words of Alexander von Humboldt in the fifth volume of *Kosmos*. The project remained incomplete. The last volume is a fragment. Alexander von Humboldt died after providing his first contribution. Posthumously completed under Eduard Buschmann's editorship, it consists essentially of contributions from other authors: Buschmann, Karl Christian Bruhns and Edward Sabine.

The centrepiece of the fifth volume is the index by Eduard Buschmann, with its 34-page introduction. Spanning a total of 1,145 pages, it can probably still claim the title of the longest index in the history of scientific literature.⁸ Thousands of terms are recorded in it, from *Áa* (distant land, Colchis) to *Zwist* (dispute). The entry for 'Columbus' extends over more than five pages, while the headword 'Alexander von Humboldt', with numerous sub- and sub-subheadings, takes up as many as 39. Eduard Buschmann's index to *Kosmos* moves away from the concept of an index of persons, works or subjects treated according to scholarly criteria, in the direction of a comprehensive word-list and a survey and interpretation of *Kosmos* ordered according to key points.

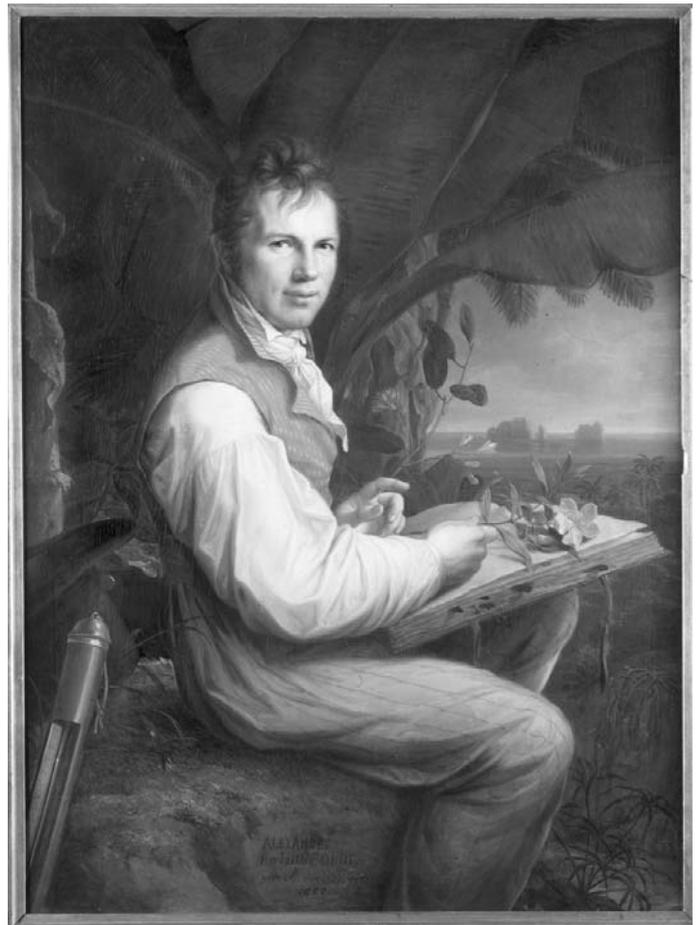
The new edition does not include this gigantic inventory. The reasons for this editorial decision were not pragmatic ones alone. Certainly, a book of already almost 1,000 large-format pages, increased by half, would have been prohibitively expensive for both the reader and the publisher. (In the five-volume first edition, the entire work came to 3,636 pages. The first four volumes total 2,339 pages; the fifth volume begins with a further 98 pages by Humboldt. So the original 'Humboldt' *Kosmos* in the true sense includes 'merely' 2,437 out of 3,636 pages in this first edition.) But the complete index to *Kosmos* has not by any means been withheld from readers of the new edition. On the publication of the book, it was presented on the Internet as part of a specially created Humboldt website: www.humboldt-portal.de. (Further information is available on the *Humboldt im Netz* platform: www.uni-potsdam.de/u/romanistik/humboldt/hin.) Since the page breaks of the first edition are marked in the text of the 2004 edition of *Kosmos*, it is quotable even in scholarly

contexts. Moreover, the index can also be used for the new edition.

If for no other reason, this 1,145-page index was excluded from the new edition because it represents a posthumous addition, and the object was to make Alexander von Humboldt's work accessible, at last, *as such*, liberating it from retrospective contributions from extraneous editors. (It should be borne in mind, for example, that Buschmann undertook retrospective corrections, so that there are isolated cases of textual deviations between the index and the text.)

Moreover, it is of great significance that Alexander von Humboldt did not himself furnish his *Kosmos* with an index. His work is precisely *not* the encyclopedic, universalist totality so often depicted since his death. All too frequently and misleadingly, *Kosmos* has been perceived and cut into shape according to pre-modern ideas of unity and completeness which Humboldt, whose experimental writing and 'transdisciplinary' scholarly practice are at odds with the idea of an all-encompassing survey and record, had with supreme confidence moved beyond.

It is far less the individual phenomena and concepts that



Alexander von Humboldt

Painting by Friedrich Georg Weitsch, 1806.

The original painting is exhibited at Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie
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Berghaus Physikalischer Atlas

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for him occupy the foreground of his own scholarly and literary work than their connections, live and in perpetual motion. The travel theme indicates an epistemology *and* an aesthetics beyond that which is fixed for all time. A programmatic statement on the very first page of his *Kosmos* reads: ‘What for so long has remained inexplicable to the investigative intelligence in a narrower range of vision, in our vicinity, is often illuminated by observations that have been made in the course of wanderings in the most remote of regions. Vegetable and animal formations that for a long time appeared to be isolated are now seen to form a series as a result of new discoveries of intermediate or transitional forms. A general chain, not in a simple linear direction, but in a fabric intertwined in netlike fashion, resulting from the higher development or withering away of certain organs, from multiple fluctuation in the relative superior strength of its parts, gradually emerges into the view of the researcher into nature.’⁹

From such a point of view, it is evident from Alexander von Humboldt’s own practice, his own poetics of indexing, that a supposedly complete index, claiming to reflect, as it were, a frozen totality, could hardly be adequate to represent his scientific knowledge. When, exceptionally, Humboldt provided his work with an index of his own making, its form differs noticeably from that of Eduard Buschmann with its aim of completeness. The index to his

Vues des Cordillères, notoriously, is incomplete. Here, using highly subjective criteria, Humboldt selected isolated concepts and on occasion individual passages and gave them well-formulated descriptions. In general, when structuring his paratexts,* he proceeds in an extremely deliberate and original manner. Just as with the labyrinthine tables of contents of *Kosmos*, which are too detailed to be of practical help to readers in getting their bearings, the index to *Ansichten der Kordilleren* is in a genre of its own. It is a specifically literary attempt whose structure corresponds to the *open* form given by Humboldt to all his works, which expressed in constantly new ways his empirical, fragmentary and occasionally self-mocking approach to scholarship.¹⁰ Humboldt’s indexes do not draw up some static overall picture, but invite us to a ‘journey’ to integrate that which ‘for a long time appeared to be isolated’: in a ‘general chain, not in a simple linear direction, but in a fabric intertwined in netlike fashion’.¹¹ They are landmarks of a journey, rather than firmly established coordinates of a laborious mapping which allows nothing to be overlooked. They demand an active reader, who does not wish to be led by the hand, but, as it were, discovers *between* the entries the actual products of research and of his own reading.

Eduard Buschmann observed very precisely that Humboldt’s tables of concepts are designed ‘like little works of art’.¹² In the introduction to his index to *Kosmos* he

concedes that Alexander von Humboldt 'was averse to material considerations and the forced form of texts'.¹³ What, from today's point of view, makes Eduard Buschmann's 'Introduction to the index' into a remarkable piece of secondary literature is not so much his repeated references to a presumed task imposed by the late author, nor the assurances that he has fulfilled 'the wishes of [Humboldt's] final years'¹⁴ 'in the manner that the deceased would have wished';¹⁵ neither is it the presumptuous claim (which Buschmann again ascribes to Humboldt) that the index constitutes 'the actual value' of *Kosmos*, the 'most important thing' about it.¹⁶

In disclosing the methodical principles of his activity (for example the differentiation of headwords by means of specific additions), Buschmann unfolds a theory of indexing which may at the same time be read as an interpretation of *Kosmos*. He seems to have grasped its concrete literary expression just as precisely as the principal meaning of aesthetic form throughout the works of Alexander von Humboldt. When he describes how difficult it was for him to assign individual indexable terms to Humboldt's language, rich as it is in terminology and synonyms, where scientific precision is as important as elegance of expression, he makes it clear how deeply the presumed bureaucrat and unbridled positivist has penetrated into Humboldt's aesthetic cosmos – even if he cannot conceal a certain uneasiness about 'this world that encounters me in such a hostile manner'.¹⁷

In passing, Eduard Buschmann sketches out a psychology of indexing. He ascribes this arduous activity to a masochistic 'tendency to undertake laborious work', which for years has demanded 'great sacrifices' of him, a positive 'obsession' with 'making what was difficult and laborious even more difficult and laborious'.¹⁸ In adding the extraordinary confession that he had found 'satisfaction' in his work on the index, 'although it is of little practical use or benefit',¹⁹ he cryptically questions the motivation of his own activity: is indexing ultimately an end in itself? Are we dealing with a scholarly reflex action, or even a compulsive activity?

The great inventory-maker combines these self-analytical reflections with a defensive gesture, that is with a 'justification of the form and extent' of his work, which he claims to have been conceived in its excessive dimensions 'contrary to everyday opinion and habit', 'diverging from that which is generally offered to the public in such ancillary labours'.²⁰ Buschmann sees the value for the reader of his work, beyond all its functions as a key to the text, in its character as a historic document: as a 'memorial of the times' in its own right.²¹

Translator's note

* Gérard Genette, in his *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), explains his term 'paratext':

a title, a subtitle, intertitles; prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords, etc.; marginal, infrapaginal, terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals.

In the introduction to *Seuils* (published in English as *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*) Genette writes:

A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal and other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. . . . These accompanying productions, which vary in extent and appearance, constitute what I have called elsewhere the work's paratext.

Notes

1. Alexander von Humboldt, *Ansichten der Cordilleren und Monumente der eingeborenen Völker Amerikas* [original French title: *Vues des Cordillères et Monumens des Peuples Indigènes de l'Amérique*], with 69 plates, edited by Oliver Lubrich and Ottmar Ette, Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag ('Die Andere Bibliothek') 2004, xiv + 450 pp. (1st edn September 2004; 2nd edn November 2004.)
2. Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, edited by Ottmar Ette and Oliver Lubrich, Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag ('Die Andere Bibliothek') 2004, xxxii + 944pp. (1st edn September 2004; 2nd edn September 2004.)
3. See Daniel Johnson, 'From a lost world', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 July 2005, pp 3–4.
4. *Kosmos* was soon translated into several languages. Before the German first edition had been completed, three English versions were published (1845–8, by A. Prichard; 1846–8, by E. Sabine; 1849–58, by E. C. Otté), one French (1846–59, by H. Faye), one Dutch (1846–63, by E. M. Beima), one Italian (1846–65, by G. Vallini), one Danish (1847–58, by C. A. Schumacher), one Russian (1848–63, by N. Frolov, M. Gusev and J. Vejnbørg), one Polish (1849–52, by J. Baranowski and L. Zejszner), one Spanish (1851–2, by F. D. Quintero), one Swedish (1852–60, by G. Thomée) and one Hungarian (1857, by I. Miksits). Numerous editions and further translations followed. (An account of the various editions and translations is found in *Alexander von Humboldts Schriften: Bibliographie der selbständig erschienenen Werke*, by Horst Fiedler and Ulrike Leitner, Berlin 2000, pp. 379–434.)
5. See Ottmar Ette, 'Von Surrogaten und Extrakten: Eine Geschichte der Übersetzungen und Bearbeitungen des amerikanischen Reisewerks Alexander von Humboldts im deutschen Sprachraum', in *Deutsche in Lateinamerika – Lateinamerika in Deutschland*, edited by Karl Kohut, Dietrich Briesemeister and Gustav Siebenmann, Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert 1996, pp. 98–126.
6. The reference is to the additions to Vol. 3 (by Karl Christian Bruhns and Eduard Buschmann) and the altered versions of Vols 3 and 4 (by Karl Christian Bruhns, Eduard Buschmann and Edward Sabine), and to 'Fernere Berichtigungen und Verbesserungen zu den ersten vier Bänden' (by Eduard Buschmann).
7. The basic text is the first edition: *Alexander von Humboldt's Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, 5 vols,

- Stuttgart/Tübingen: Cotta 1845–62. (The years shown on the title-pages, 1845, 1847, 1850, 1858 and 1862, do not precisely correspond to the various dates when the individual volumes were actually published: 1845, 1846/47, 1850/51, 1854/57 and 1859/62.)
8. Eduard Buschmann, 'Index to Kosmos', in Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, Stuttgart: Cotta 1862, Vol. 5, pp. 125–1270.
 9. Humboldt, *Kosmos*, Vol. 1, p. 33.
 10. The fact that the index to *Ansichten der Cordilleren* was amplified (with commentary) in the first German edition (pp 435–47), in view of these reflections, signifies a careful enhancement of its usefulness for today's reader.
 11. Humboldt, *Kosmos*, Vol. 1, p. 33.
 12. Eduard Buschmann, 'Introduction to the Index', in Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, Stuttgart: Cotta 1862, Vol. 5, pp.127–60, in particular p. 130.
 13. *ibid*, p. 127.
 14. *ibid*, p. 127.
 15. *ibid*, p. 128.
 16. *ibid*, pp. 127, 129.
 17. *ibid*, p. 134.
 18. *ibid*, p. 128.
 19. *ibid*, p. 128.
 20. *ibid*, p. 128.
 21. *ibid*, p. 129.
- Ottmar Ette has been Professor of Romance Literature at the University of Potsdam, Brandenburg, since 1995. He has received a number of awards for his work on Humboldt, José Martí and Roland Barthes. He is co-editor of the *Iberoamericana*, and the founder and co-editor of the international electronic review *HiN – Alexander von Humboldt in the Net* and the Humboldt-platform *Humboldt in the Net*.
- Oliver Lubrich is Assistant Professor at the Institute of General and Comparative Literature at the Free University Berlin. He has written extensively on Alexander von Humboldt and is currently working on *Alexander von Humboldt and the Dynamics of Travel*. His other main interest is travel literature relating to Nazi Germany. (*Reisen ins Reich 1933–1945* (Frankfurt 2004) is to be followed by a companion anthology of international descriptions of the air raids in the Second World War.) Other publications include *Postcolonial Poetics* (2003), *Shakespeare's Selbstdekonstruktion* (Würzburg 2001), various translations and articles on, for example, museology and Jewish culture, Jean Genet, Thomas Wolfe, Dracula and James Bond. He also curated the exhibition, *Signs of the Times: Jewish Life in Germany Today* (2000–04).

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