

TRADUÇÃO CULTURAL NA CONSTRUÇÃO E INTERPRETAÇÃO DA LINGUAGEM VISUAL

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RESUMO: Discutimos neste artigo a construção da identidade sexual do sexo feminino subalterno. As mulheres de seios nus (representativas de nudez tribal) retratadas na fotografia de *National Geographic* que interpretamos, pertencem ao grupo étnico Lisu e este fato atribui à representação características diferentes do retrato da nudez da mulher ocidental e acaba perturbando noções hegemônicas de representação por reescrever a relação entre o olhar do fotógrafo, o sujeito representado e o espectador.

Palavras-chave: sexualidade, mulheres subalternas, letramento visual

ABSTRACT: We discuss in this article the construction of sexual identity of the female subaltern gender. The bare-breasted women (representative of tribal nudity) depicted in the picture of *National Geographic* - and interpreted in this text - belong to the Lisu ethnic group. This very fact attaches to the representation different characteristics than the portrayal of Western female nudity that end up disrupting hegemonic notions of representation by rewriting the relationship among the photographer's gaze, the subject that is depicted and the viewer.

Keywords: sexuality, subaltern women, visual literacy

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Globalization processes have changed the ways identities are perceived. The Other² who used to be foreign and alien has passed from the process of what Mendieta (2007) calls the *detranscendentalization of alterity* (p. 21). This means that, on the one hand, this Other has become a more intimate figure within the frontiers of the nation-state and that, on the other hand, cultural identities have been uncoupled from notions of geography, locality and place. However, the production of knowledge on the Other has not changed much in postcolonial times, at least not in some contexts.

National Geographic has been one of the main popular vehicles of knowledge production on identities for more than one century and has constructed identities of "exotic" people for its national and global public (Bryan, 1987). Pictures of tribal nudity and mainly of bare breasted brown-skinned and Asian Pacific women have been the magazine's trademark for almost as long as it exists. We analyze a photograph that appeared in the magazine in the May 2009 article: "Searching for Shangri-La: Two Visions of the Future Compete for the Soul of China's Western Frontier" and we try to decolonize the gaze: the photographer's and our own. We argue that although on one level the photograph conforms to colonial stereotypes, on another level it disrupts the colonial gaze by denying the viewer the pleasure of viewing the women depicted as exotic and erotic objects.

National Geographic draws upon images of the world that are coagulations of "spatiotemporal configurations" (MENDIETA, 2007, p. 41). Those images of the world are ways we understand our relationships to space and time and this conceptualization of the world "mirrors the way we conceptualize ourselves as humans"³. We suppose that the world images that *National Geographic* constructs reconfirm and, simultaneously, destabilize and relocate local space and time in our globalized world. In the case of Shangri-La, for example, where Tibetan culture has been commercialized in China's West, it is expected that space and time will be destabilized and relocated backwards in a developmental line since the space is still more natural and pure than constructed and the time is more spiritual than materialistic.

² The Other is someone who doesn't belong to dominant groups such as men, white, Christian, straight etc.

³ *ibid.*

The question we focus on is whether visual representations and conceptualizations of the world have been altered because of globalization processes. We set out from Reingard Nethersole's idea that globalization demands a "theory that is both connective and disruptive" (apud. COOPAN, 2004, p. 22). We also like the relational image that Damrosch conjures for the world literature: it occupies an "elliptical space" defined by the "twin foci" of "home tradition" and "radical otherness"⁴. We believe that the globally circulating photographs of *National Geographic* also occupy an elliptical space where there are two centers: the home culture of the represented participants and the cultures where those images circulate. Viewers undergo processes of familiarization and de-familiarization since they are acquainted with some aspects of the photographs and estranged from others.

We address, in this article, the picture of women that belong to the Lisu ethnic group, one of the 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by the People's Republic of China. It is supposed to be a characteristic photo of *National Geographic* since it depicts bare breasted women, a staple of the magazine. The photograph was taken by Fritz Hoffmann, a photographer who has lived for thirteen years in China as a resident photojournalist and his pictures have contributed to people all over the world catching a glimpse and an understanding of China and its processes⁵.

We examine the meanings that are attributed to this photo in our globalized world. Brydon, in her article "[Difficult Forms of Knowing: Enquiry, Injury and Translocated Relations of Postcolonial Responsibility](#)." (forthcoming), "reads textual and visual forms of expression to stress the challenges they pose to routine or easy forms of knowing and the assumptions on which they rest". By conducting the process of genealogy of our assumptions, we can get to some understanding of the reasons we hold certain beliefs and construct our knowledge of the world in certain ways.

Undoubtedly, the question of power is an important aspect of any photograph. Any kind of printed material creates a relationship between the

⁴ ibid: 20

⁵ <http://www.fritzhoffmann.com/about.php>

represented participants and the interactive participants⁶. This relation is characterized by power relations which are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed as the printed material circulates among its readers. In the case of *National Geographic*, its images circulate beyond transnational borders. When the western photographer takes a picture that is supposed to represent a subaltern community, s/he exercises a power on this community by representing it in certain ways and not others. Readers also find themselves in a dominant position since they have the power to interpret the subject represented. And how about the subjects represented? Do they have any power?

Although the represented subaltern subjects seem to have limited power in the way they are represented and interpreted in the different communities where their representation circulates, their corporeality, facial expression and gaze have the power to transmit meanings that create for them a subject-position. The landscape where they are photographed also contributes and affects the construction of their identities. However, their representation sometimes empowers them and other times turns them into an object or victim.

Genealogically speaking, *National Geographic* has depicted a large number of bare breasted women in its history. Although nudity can be interpreted in different ways, culturally, nudity has been associated with lack of modesty. Different readings are usually conveyed through the use of colors and the way of dressing that people are portrayed. Color has also been linked to lack of modesty and a close-to-nature disposition (LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993, p. 172). Civilized white women tend to cover their body.

The picture (Figure 1) that follows is a *National Geographic* milestone. This photograph of a Zulu bride and groom in Witwatersrand, South Africa, became the magazine's first picture in *National Geographic* of a bare-breasted woman when it was published in the November 1896 issue. The decision to run it set a precedent to publish photos of indigenous peoples "as they are".

⁶ *Represented participants* are the people, the places and things depicted in images and *interactive participants* are the people who communicate with each other through images, the producers and viewers of images (KRESS; van Leeuwen: 1996:p. 119)



Figure 1: Zulu bride and groom in Witwatersrand

Most of the women that have appeared bare breasted in *National Geographic* have been black or from the Pacific islands. On the one hand, black women who bare their breast have been shown as exuberant and with excessive sexuality. On the other hand, Asia Pacific women have been depicted as possessing a passive sexuality and a ready-to-please nature (LUTZ; COLLINS, 1993, p. 137). When representing certain racial types in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, *National Geographic* was inclined to depict their women naked. One of the reasons for this trend is the fact that the magazine was managed by and addressed to sexually repressed men. These women with their relaxed sexuality represented a temptation for them. *National Geographic* fulfilled the function of *Playboy* by disguising its voyeuristic tendencies under the veil of its scientific mission.

These photographic representations of bare breasted native women follow a long tradition of Europeans trying to understand the essence of the people that are different from them and being attracted to this difference. At the end of the 19th century, the European eye fulfilled its voyeuristic need for the nude by contemplating the native body of the Other. Black bodies were represented as muscular while Asian Pacific feminine bodies were plump and irradiated gentleness and comfort. Black women usually stared back at the photographer and the viewer.

On the other hand, Asian Pacific women looked away and did not challenge the photographer or the viewer.



Figure 2: A 1986 photograph of Ulithian women. Photo by David Hiser

According to Bhabha (1984) (apud. SOUZA, 2004, p. 115), identity is a sign whose main characteristic is arbitrariness. Any attempt to represent identity involves the process of translation. And in the case of the representation of the Other's identity, the language used to construct this Other will involve cultural translation. There is no way of authentically representing cultural identity since any representation is always mediated by the historical and social perception of language of the one making the representation.

Although visual language and specifically photography is supposed to reflect the object of observation realistically, Bhabha (1984) believes that any representation involves ideological mediation. Any image of cultural identity, may it be constructed by a hegemonic or subaltern group, will always be fashioned within the regulated boundaries of the social discourse that forms the ideology of the specific group.

We will focus on figuring out whether Hoffmann's gaze repeats patriarchal and voyeuristic patterns of representation that have been dominant in photographs of subaltern people. The print in which the subjects appear in full length suggests some distance between the photographer and the represented participants since only two of the twelve people that appear in the picture have

their torsos turned to the camera. There are five women in the foreground and six more figures that appear to be masculine ones but are peripheral and backgrounded. Most of the bodies are depicted sideways or with their backs to the photographer.

The women's bodies absorb the light and we can see them more clearly than the rest of the bodies. Nonetheless, the women's faces are hardly discernable because the photograph is blurred, a strategy that enhances the spirituality of the picture. The Lisu women are indifferent to the camera and they make no eye contact with the viewer. They seem to be unaware of the photographer's presence and neither their expression nor their eyes can be clearly seen.



Figure 3: Lisu women bathe in thermal pools to celebrate the coming of spring. A proposed dam would drown this site, one of the valley's few remaining public baths. Developers have turned other springs into tourist resorts.

The women's bodies are portrayed in all their natural beauty and imperfection. The photo does not seem to have been retouched in order to correct the body flaws: some breasts are small, others are sagging, the body skin of some is wrinkled and of others with cellulite. Furthermore, some of the women are depicted washing their hair and body. By showing these women, covered with the foam of white soap, rubbing themselves in the thermal pools, the picture intensifies the meanings of purging and spirituality that it seeks to represent.

The eroticism in the representation of bare breasted women in history usually lay on the disposition of the bodies or the limbs. The women were usually just posing for the photographer and their bodies and limbs were positioned in such a way as to emphasize their beauty and sensuality. Although black and Asian women could have been represented and depicted in a million different ways, they were usually unclothed for the appreciation of the European bourgeoisie. They were the image of freedom and exuberant erotic urges.

However, this photograph of Lisu women embraces the native bodies and at the same time tries to subvert the stereotype constructed over the years. These bodies do not necessarily arouse desire. The main participant, the woman washing her hair in the source, possesses a slender and muscular body. The woman covered with the foam of soap has a small and well rounded breast although she has a protruding belly. The two foregrounded women are wearing pink underwear that give a more romantic aura to the picture. The woman in the middle of the bare breasted women has her face completely turned to the camera. She is skinny, with sagging breasts. The last bare breasted woman is exhibiting an abundant breast, although part of it is covered by her hair. The faces of these women seem to vanish since the viewers focus their gaze on the bare bodies.

The scenery is not particularly picturesque. Although the Lisu women are photographed in a natural space, this place is not aestheticized. There are more human figures than natural space and the backdrop is black. Somehow, lack of an exuberant nature makes the reader attribute fewer exotic characteristics to the women depicted since the close association between femininity and nature does not take place. The geography of the bodies does not indicate a sexual aesthetic and this disrupts the voyeuristic gaze. On the other hand, the silence of the photograph, the absence of awareness of the bare breasted women of being beheld and the lack of disclosure of any signs of desire from their part enhances the position of the viewer as a voyeur (MITCHELL, 2005, p. 44).

The photograph is dimly lit and has a spiritual aura since the vapor of the thermal pool makes the picture acquire a blurring that matches its theme. It depicts the women performing a ritual that somehow tries to quench the Western audience's thirst for spirituality. However, the photograph disrupts the western framework of seeing the east as a *locus* of spirituality and attributing to it a mythical, non-historic time. The politics of the place and the processes it is going

through appear in the caption: "A proposed dam would drown this site, one of the valley's few remaining public baths. Developers have turned other springs into tourist resorts".

Lefebvre (1991) explains that "the lyrical space of legend and myth, of forests, lakes and oceans vies with the bureaucratic and political space to which the nation states have been giving form since the seventeenth century. Yet it also completes that space, supplying it with a 'cultural' side" (p. 231). This caption also makes the readers grasp the complexity of such spaces and results in the non-essentialization of the non-west as the opposite of the west's rationality and modernity. Chinese society has been moving towards a certain direction and so has its space.

The modern material world demands that the non Western nations make the necessary adjustments in order to comply with the rules of the contemporary capitalistic world. However, nationalism demands that this process take place without the individuals' losing their spiritual essence and, consequently, their national and 'true' identity. Many traditional cultures that go through the process of modernization are resistant to changes in relation to social class distinctions and the patriarchal forms of domination in the family. In this spirit, gender role changes tend to be more symbolic than substantive.

The magazine separates the domain of culture into two spheres-the material and the spiritual. The materiality of the world is something that dominates human lives and because of globalization humans find it impossible to work out a different material order, other than capitalism. Nevertheless, in order to compete with the West, the East and South need to get financially independent and stop being materially subjugated. As Chatterjee (1997) explains:

It was in the material sphere that the claims of Western civilization were the most powerful. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft-these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to impose their dominance over the whole world (p. 244).

The ideological sieve towards modernization does not reject the West and its frame of mind but works according to the principle of selection. Reformers choose what liberal ideas should be accepted since it seems important to be

selective in the choice of what suits you to adopt and what does not. People who support reforms in the traditional way of being usually believe that imitation of the West should only take place in the material aspect of culture and not in the spiritual since the East and the South are considered to be much superior in this domain than the West. They are assured that the loss of the spiritual aspect of identity would lead to a loss of the distinctive national identity as such:

The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us—a mere external, which influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual, which lies within, that is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential (CHATTERJEE, 1997, p. 245).

This distinction between the material and the spiritual world is also a differentiation between the inner and outer world. In traditional societies, it is men who represent and move in the outer world where the material pursuits are manifested. On the other hand, women represent the domestic and inner world where spiritual balance and fulfillment are aspired to. The external sphere is where the humans compete and exteriorize their aggressiveness. Still, the internal, domestic world is where the true and balanced self can find its expression.

This separation of the social space conceives the world in a patriarchal frame of mind and perpetuates the traditional aspects of society and culture. However, societies that pass from the process of modernization in a manner that is more abrupt than the process of modernization in the West, acknowledge that there are some aspects of their social order that they have to preserve. For this, they might seem to be conservative and manifest a resistance to bring change in their internal social sphere.

In the picture of the Lisu women, we see the materialistic world invading the spiritual world and causing its destruction. Although Chatterjee's (1997) theory separates the two domains, we see that capitalism penetrates spiritual and natural sites and only permits few of them to persevere as touristic sites and reminders of a pure past. Although Lisu women are portrayed in the external sphere, they maintain the spiritual characteristics attributed to women.

Finally, we argue that Hoffmann contests singular notions of colonial gaze and defies the construction of Shangri-La as a spiritual site, stuck in a mythical time and inhabited by exotic women. This way he calls into question essentialist views of places and identities and disrupts hegemonic notions of representation by rewriting the relationship among the photographer's gaze, the subject that is depicted and the viewer.

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