

## **O Olhar Híbrido nas Narrativas Visuais da *National Geographic***

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### **RESUMO**

A National Geographic tem sido por mais de um século um dos veículos mais populares de divulgação de conhecimento de lugares e culturas. Nós vamos analisar a narrativa visual que apareceu no artigo de Janeiro 2007, intitulado “Amazon: from forest to farms” e tentar comprovar que estas narrativas de viagens que são construídas através de fotos são híbridas porquê são sempre contadas por um olhar que é alheio à cultura que é representada. No caso do artigo que nos interessa este olhar é influenciado pelas contraposições entre desenvolvimento e preservação e conceitos como modernidade e tradição que são contraposições ocidentais e atravessam as escolhas feitas pelos profissionais da revista. O olhar que capta as fotos é um olhar atravessado de ideologias e crenças diferentes dessas da cultura representada. Além disso, a escolha final das fotos que vão ser publicadas, a ordem em que elas vão aparecer, o tamanho que elas vão ocupar e as legendas que vão ter são todas escolhas que são feitas por pessoas que encontram-se fora do contexto da representação. Então a realidade que surge da narrativa fotográfica é uma realidade ficcional construída por conceitos que não necessariamente representam a cultura do “outro”. Este hibridismo pode ser visto na maneira que a foto é tirada, na composição e na seqüência das fotos e no nível de significados – cosmo visão. A impossibilidade de inclusão sem a exclusão. Hibridismo, neste contexto, pode ser entendido como processo de tradução cultural, um processo dinâmico. Hibridismo é uma característica do local da enunciação (atravessa o local de enunciação). A recepção da narrativa é também híbrida. Hibridismo é um processo cultural analógico. Tentar inserir as forças globais no local.

*National Geographic* has long been the largest nonprofit scientific and educational institution and magazine in the world. It seeks to spread geographical knowledge by studying societies and the natural environment. In this context, it is interested in researching and understanding issues such as the battle for resources, wildlife, health and science. The present paper sets out to show why the visual narratives produced/constructed by *National Geographic's* writers, editors, photographers and designers are hybrid and how this fact influences the way the situation in the Brazilian rainforest is depicted through images in the article “Amazon: Forest to Farms”, published in the Jan/2007 issue.

The pictorial representations of places and cultures that have appeared in the magazine through the years make us remember what Bhabha (1990) has pointed out:

*“In fact the sign of the ‘cultured’ or the ‘civilised’ attitude is the ability to appreciate cultures in a kind of musée imaginaire; as though one should be able to collect and appreciate them. Western connoisseurship is the capacity to understand and locate cultures in a universal time-frame that acknowledges their various historical and social contexts only eventually to transcend them and render them transparent.”* (pg.208)

One of the reasons that the visual narratives that are created by the magazine *National Geographic* are always hybrid is that this representation is the result of complex negotiations between cultural systems and carry with them uncertainties, conflicts and contradictions. When the photographer, reaches the “contact zone” (Pratt, 1992) he focuses on images that tell a story which is pre-constructed in his/her mind through the cultural system, beliefs and political currents of his/her time. However, this hybridization works the opposite way, too. The pre-constructed narrative gets contaminated by the realities encountered in the “contact zone”. The result of this negotiation is “... a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor”.(Bakhtin, 1981, pg.358)

Moreover, we believe that the photographic narratives that are created in *National Geographic* are hybrid in other manners, too. First, as Bhabha (1990) points out every culture passes from a process of “cultural translation” since it has to create

symbols and rituals that homogenize the cultural practices of the members of this culture. Every culture, through its symbols and rituals, mimics the image that has invented for itself. Furthermore, Bhabha (1990) empties the concept of “original”, because he defends that there is no “original” culture, because every culture is hybrid since each and every one of them is plural.

Another point that we would like to raise is that this kind of representation tends to erase differences and heterogeneities and homogenize the represented culture and its people. The complex, plural and shifting identities that are product of the cultural, social and racial processes that take place simultaneously in every place, tend to be grouped together in a small number of categories. So this entails the homogenization in the article “Brazil: From Forest to Farms” of the Indians of the Amazon, of those who fight against deforestation, of the loggers and of those that defend a high-scale industrialization of the tropical rainforest. The characteristics contributed to each one of these groups homogenize their participants.

So, how come every culture is hybrid and there is no such thing as pure culture? “Pure” and “hybrid” are categories that completely depend on a point of view of the person or the institution evaluating the categories. As Briam Stross (1999) claims: “There are after all no ‘pure’ individuals, no ‘pure’ cultures, no ‘pure’ genres. All things are of necessity ‘hybrid’” (p.266). Moreover, “the cultural hybrid...can be a person who represents the blending of traits from diverse cultures or traditions, or even more broadly it can be a culture, or element of culture, derived from unlike sources; that is, something heterogeneous in origin or composition” (p. 254).

Another aspect of the hybridity that constitutes this kind of representation is the fact that when the “Other” is represented, s/he is always absorbed by the cultural values of the institution that is representing. That’s why it is important to recognize the particularities and specificities of the *locus of enunciation*. Which values and world-view, in general, permeates the narratives it creates. Do these representations perpetuate well-known stereotypes or do they try to corrode stereotypes by showing diverse representations of the “Other”?

Furthermore, the visual narratives of *National Geographic* are at the same time global and local. The locality acquires a dialectic with global political and social issues, because, nowadays, in every local you can find the global. The whole world is influenced, in some way, by the same kind of global designs. So even, such things as industrialization and mass production have reached the tropical rainforest. On the other

hand, the local influences the global narratives of preservation of the environment that are prevalent nowadays. It shows that the global perception of the tropical rainforest as something pure, natural and pacific is mistaken, and that, in fact it is a territory where power games are being played since its value is nowadays considered enormous.

Hybrid is also the reception of these visual narratives. Readers receive these representations as a reflection of the reality of the "Other". However, they tend to attach to these narratives interpretations that are constituted by their own cultural systems and values. So, also the process of reception is a hybrid one.

The images in this article can be divided into the following categories: of destruction of the Amazon forest, of production, of the inhabitants of the forest and of the measures taken to combat the cutting down of trees. The visual narrative provides information together with an aesthetic dimension that communicates feeling and emotion. We believe that the photographs selected to represent the reality of the Amazon rainforest are necessarily influenced by the institution's theory of what is going on in the world and "by the intellectual and political currents of the time." (Lutz and Collins 1993, 79) And what, finally, emerges from this visual narrative is the studied juxtaposition of traditional and modern, of the natural and the civilized man which are favorite themes of *National Geographic*.

The first image we get is the one on the cover. As it is commonly done in *National Geographic*, this introductory image offers an aerial view, in this case of the Amazon rainforest that clearly shows the destruction that is taking place. It is the picture of a lonely tree standing in a land ready to be cultivated. This kind of "opening" or "grabber" image is common in the magazine because it gives the reader an overview of the story to be developed, is visually exciting and contains information relevant to the article. When Western people refer to the Amazon rainforest, they probably imagine a very dense forest in which wild and, at the same time, exotic species live. The purpose of this image on the cover, where a human being seems to be protecting himself/herself under the last tree that remains standing and the opening picture of the article is to deconstruct their perception of tropical rainforest and show that, nowadays, there are only patches of green remaining or lonely trees.

The title "Last of the Amazon" and the beginning of the article that reads: "In the time it takes to read this article, an area of Brazil's rain forests larger than 200 football fields will have been destroyed" serve to alert the readers. The magnitude of the destruction is represented in terms westerners are acquainted with, that is football fields.

Although it is difficult to measure deforestation, the magazine adopts an accessible to its readers' measure of space and time. This shows how the magazine takes pictures from their historical and cultural context in order to deal with issues that Westerners are worried about. The vanishing of the forest is proved in this picture.

The next picture shows Manoki Indians "displaced from their ancestral territory, return to reclaim the land ritually and lament its degradation". And then, there is an image of highly mechanized, industrial-scale soybeans farm situated in the tropical rainforest in the state of Mato Grosso. The juxtaposition of this picture to the previous one explores the contrast between the traditional and the modern. Man versus machine. Moreover, it is clear that if a picture with the same subject were taken in North America, it wouldn't look much different. So, in spite of this soybean farm being situated in what used to be part of the Brazilian tropical rainforest, it also shows how development and industrialization reaches different parts of the world in exactly the same manner.

And what comes next is the image of a grave yard made up of white and red crosses: the white ones representing the victims of land wars and the red ones symbolizing local people now under death threats. The caption reads that "a boy mourns activist Dorothy Stang at a gathering to mark the first anniversary of her murder". Again, who is conscious of the devastation taking place and fights against it is an outsider, or more a Westerner. If we contrast this image to the image of the Manoki Indians, that try to preserve the land of their ancestors with rituals, we see two opposing ways of dealing with the issue: the local and the foreign. In this case, both seem to be fruitless.

The next picture is of cowboys with their cattle herds. Though, herding cows might not seem to be a very modern activity, it is one that generates capital. Again, what underlies this image is the western opposition between subsistence way of production and large scale or capitalistic one.

The next picture is of a logger who illegally fells a hardwood on a private ranch. And then a three-page image which depicts the ugliness of certain areas of the Amazon where there is full-scale industrialization of what used to be an exotic place. The deforestation that can be seen reaching the horizon intensify the message of destruction and its scale.

The next image is captioned as follows: "Golden cargo on the Madeira River, this boatload of soybeans which belongs to Blairo Maggi, the "King of Soy". Again, what

we have here is the repeated image of men at work. The adjective “golden” adds to the aesthetic beauty of the product. The product of high-scale production is made aesthetically attractive and this process makes readers attach to it positive characteristics.

The next image shows a neighborhood that has sprang around Altamira, a frontier city in Pará. What can be seen are the poor conditions these people live in. These destitute settlers were escaping poverty in Brazil’s overcrowded south and northeast in the 1970s, when Brazil’s military dictatorship pursued a policy of “*integrar para não entregar*,” meaning “occupy it or risk losing it.”

The two next pictures show the steps that are being taken in order to preserve the forest. In one of the pictures, we see Federal police and the next one shows agents of IBAMA.

This is a non-very flattering image of the Panará Indians. The caption shows how the Panará Indians have been squeezed into smaller and smaller regions and how a big part of them has died due to diseases which the arrival of the “white man” brought.

In the closing image, what is shown is not a very optimist picture of the inhabitants of the rainforest that opt for traditional ways of farming or illegal logging.

In this visual narrative, although we are talking about the biggest and wildest green area in the world, nature is not represented as “a spiritual domain in which the ills of civilization could be cured” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 95) which is a common practice in *National Geographic*. In fact, it is represented as a degraded environment. The cities that have sprang in the forest look melancholic in the photographs. The Indian villages, too. However, where the forest has turned into a means of production, the images have a clearer definition. The colors are exuberant and they portray *National Geographic*’s favorite subject: “the view of a world at work.” (Lutz and Collins 1993, 106)

Although, the Amazon Indians are rendered as exotic which is a common way of *National Geographic* of portraying “subaltern” people and are *naturalized*, they are at the same time portrayed as destitute, willing to go back in time and not to be part of the international system of production and consumption that leads to the destruction of their natural habitat. The rest of the inhabitants are pictured as squatters, destitute, willing to live another life somewhere else.

The two images of the steps taken to fight deforestation also emphasize the inefficiency of the procedures. A small group of people in each image trying to control a

place like the Amazon. The absence of high-tech methods that are available nowadays and can monitor the situation becomes apparent.

Another interesting aspect of the hybridity that is constitutive of these narratives is the way each culture has aesthetic values that are permeated by the culture of the “Other”. One of *National Geographic*’s favorite subjects is ‘men at work’ and several of the images in this article depict men doing different kinds of activities. These images, in some level, prove that a solid nation is mirrored in the man’s virile and athletic figure.

Finally, it becomes apparent, that although *National Geographic* preaches caring about the planet, in this article the pictures that are most aesthetically attractive are the ones that are related to production and industrialization. Only the picture of the mills comes as an exception, because it doesn’t only show the vast deforestation that is taking place but also the pollution of the environment that comes as the result of the industrialization of the biggest green area left on earth.

Another interesting omission of the magazine is the absence of an image that shows how this vast deforestation is taking place. The only picture of logging is the one of the lonely logger in the middle of the forest. However, this image does not prove what is written in the beginning of the article: “In the time it takes to read this article, an area of Brazil’s rain forest larger than 200 football fields will have been destroyed.”

The magazine suggests that the international system of modernization and progress has infiltrated into the tropical rain forest and there is no way to turn back. The magazine constructs the situation in the Amazon as Brazil’s dilemma: Allow widespread—and profitable—destruction of the rain forest to continue, or intensify conservation efforts. The encounter of global and local cultural systems in the reality and in its representation create a narrative that is permeated by both cultures. One of the processes that every photographer of *National Geographic* has to go through is that of cultural translation. Bhabha ( 2000) explains the term:

*“Cultural translation is not simply appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems of reference, norms and values, by departing from the habitual or ‘inbred’ rules of transformation. Ambivalence and antagonism accompanies any act of cultural translation, because negotiating with*

*the 'difference of the other' reveals the radical insufficiency of sedimented, settled systems of meaning and signification" (p. 139)*

Every time a photographer is asked to create a photographic narrative of people that belong to "Other" cultures, s/he passes from the experience of cultural translation. This means that s/he starts questioning his/her values and seeing the insufficiency of his/her cultural systems. As a participant in a cultural system, the photographer identifies with certain ideas, values and groups of people. However, in the "contact zone" or "third space" where cultures interact, a negotiation of ideologies and values takes place that contaminates the visual narratives created by the photographer and at the same time, the subject represented gets contaminated by the cultural system of the photographer because s/he starts seeing himself/herself through the eyes of the ideologies that permeate the narrative of the photographer. This way, every culture signifies and resignifies itself through the circulation of experiences.

In this process the photographer and the institution s/he represents together with the culture and people represented, through the questioning of their values and culture systems are transformed into agency. This agency emerges from the understanding that cultures and identities are highly heterogeneous and complex and that power is not absolute, but relational.

We don't know if the hybridity of this genre brings any social, political or ideological practical changes. Or if changes can only be seen in the theoretical level. However, for Bhabha hybridity always destabilizes hegemonic structures.

This way of analyzing this genre helps us also see the world not as a ground of binaries and dichotomies like hegemonic # subaltern, rational # emotional, cultural # natural, but as a space where these binaries meet and become productive. For sure, photographers do not produce work that does not reflect the ideologies they endorse. However, being in the "contact zone" makes them rethink the validity of the values and currents that underlie their work.

As Lemke (1997) points out: *"Meaningful, meaning making practices are hybrid objects, they are both natural and cultural; they are part of material ecologies and they are part of cultural systems of meaning. They have physical, material, thermodynamic, ecological relationships and interdependencies with one another, and they have meaning relations of other kinds, including value relations to one another in the cultural system of a community"*. (pg. 40)



This kind of hybridity implies a juxtaposition or coexistence of contraries, that never result in a third element. The hybridity of this genre creates a very productive ground with ethical and aesthetic values that belong to no specific culture

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