

Reading National Geographic., Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993. 309 pages. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

by

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As I write this, I have just received an advertisement from the National Geographic Society, saying that as a member, I have the opportunity to be one of the first to purchase a volume on the greatest photographs ever published in the *National Geographic*. Like many others, especially anthropologists (I suspect), I grew up reading *National Geographic*, had access to National Geographic publications, and probably got my first images of different cultures and peoples from the magazine. How accurate a picture do we get? What does it attempt to portray and why? The burgeoning field of visual anthropology examines images and films and attempts to understand them within their social context. How do photographs communicate or evoke ideas? What is the social framework in which they are produced—"the historical and cultural context that gives the photograph and its elements their meaning and significance" (p. 5)? What is the role of such images in our society, and do they play a major role in enculturation?

In order to address such questions, two anthropologists decided to analyze how *National Geographic* presents and illustrates non-Western people, and the result is a fascinating book. The authors have each carried out traditional ethnographic fieldwork abroad, one in Micronesia (Lutz), the other in the Peruvian Andes (Collins). Having studied cultures far away from home, they have turned their attention to how their own portrays such people. *National Geographic* creates images of the natural world, of plants, animals, and the environment, not to mention great new discoveries in palaeontology and archaeology. But more often than not their subject is people, the more exotic the better. Until global television coverage began, the magazine was probably the main source of information about, and in turn influences our perceptions of, other human societies. It is a powerful source indeed; in this book we learn that *National Geographic* has the third largest subscription list in the USA, after *TV Guide* and the *Reader's Digest*. But what are readers getting out of it? Marketing studies conducted by the magazine itself show that 53% of subscribers read only the picture captions, ignoring the associated articles.

The authors state that various researchers studying mass media have examined how photographs and popular culture are manufactured. Such work concentrates on determining the context or framework in which images are produced, as well as the reaction of readers or consumers of the information provided. In their book, Lutz and Collins examine *National Geographic* by focusing on a number of issues. The first is the process of producing images of the non-Western world. How are topics for coverage selected? What is considered worthy of inclusion? In what social framework have the magazine's editors and photographers worked, and how has this changed over the hundred year history of the magazine? In discussing these issues, the authors present a history of social thinking over the late 19th and 20th centuries. In the early years of the magazine, anthropologists and other social theorists used non-Western peoples as models for the evolutionary stages that western people had progressed through on their way to political and social supremacy. The world was orderly and knowable, each society had its place in the global picture, and could be studied by professional social scientists. This view of progress lasted until the First World War, when it was replaced by a more subjective, pessimistic approach. The founders of *National Geographic* tried to combine the academic study of people with entertainment. In 1915, Gilbert Hovey Grosvesnor announced seven principles which would guide the publication's editorial staff, photographers and other employees. These included a call for absolute accuracy, as well as objective reporting of important issues. Nothing controversial or parti-

san would be included. The emphasis would be on the photographs themselves, which in a sense would speak for themselves. With the Second World War, the United States became more involved with global affairs. Afterwards, despite decolonization and regional conflicts such as the Vietnam War, the magazine continued to present “an idealized and exotic world relatively free of pain or class conflict, a world stumbling or marching on the path to modernity” (p. 46).

The authors conducted interviews with current magazine staff in 1989 and 1990. Most see their work as nonpolitical and objective, in much the same way as Grosvenor moulded it. The kind of people working for the magazine have changed. While they tend to be fairly conservative, underneath everything they do believe in the humanist perspective of the psychic unity of mankind. Employees assert that certain topics remain unpopular, most notably anything addressing social problems, and perhaps surprisingly, anything about Africa that isn't wildlife or nature.

What is the structure and content of the images themselves? What kinds of photographs are used, and what are they trying to tell us? A random sample of photographs from the period A.D. 1950 to 1986 were selected and coded for 22 attributes. Listed in an appendix, these include location, gender and age of subjects, group size and layout, presence or absence of westerners, dress style, activity level and type, whether the setting was urban or rural, skin colour and the kind of technology shown. When analyzed, the photographs reveal a common perspective. Third world people are idealized or rendered exotic. They are shown living their everyday lives, untouched by outside events. Many photographs focus on ritual behaviour, a part of culture seen as most likely to have been retained unchanged from the past. If people are not portrayed traditionally, they are shown as making the slow transition towards more modern, westernized behaviour, using imported goods, tools, machinery and new modes of dress. Certain kinds of people are shown more often than others. A geographic breakdown of articles published between 1950 to 1986 shows that 35% were about Asia, almost 22% about Latin America, 15% Middle East and North Africa, 12% for each of Africa and the Pacific, and 6% for Polar regions. The authors argue that the humanist mission of the magazine, portraying people as basically the same despite cultural differences, conflicts with its readers' notion of progress and ranking of societies (i.e. we know that cultures are different, even though the magazine tries to downplay the significance of these differences).

The third topic is how contemporary readers view and interpret the photographs. This is addressed by interviewing 55 actual and potential subscribers, showing them a randomly selected group of photographs, asking them to create narratives about the images. The readers came from two different age groups: those 35 to 49 years of age, who became adults at the time of the Vietnam War, and a post-war generation, 18 to 20 years old. They came from two different states, New York and Hawaii. Despite gender, age and cross-cultural exposure, their responses to the questions were very similar. The *National Geographic* image of modernization and resulting loss of traditional culture is well understood.

After reading this book, I probably won't look at *National Geographic* in the same way again. A magazine that for many of us was our first exposure to other cultures does try to influence that way we see and understand them. So, if I take the National Geographic Society up on its offer to purchase the greatest photographs ever to appear between the covers of its magazine, I would probably use this book as a guide to understand what I am seeing and why.