

Seeing History

Fernando Coronil

I believe these three essays offer, individually and collectively, a significant contribution to a much-needed examination of the role of images in the making of collective identities and national imaginaries in Latin America. The authors, sensitive to the multiple meanings of cultural artifacts, interpret these images by placing them in the context of their production and circulation, as well as in dialogue with other practices and discourses. While the essays focus on the cultural functions of photographs in Latin America, they contribute to an expanding interdisciplinary discussion on the role of visibility in social life that counters the pervasive logocentric bias that has afflicted social analysis. Treating imagery as a distinct semantic field, the essays contribute to overcoming the pervasive split between image and word in Western theory.¹ They also make evident the need to advance toward a more holistic understanding of the role of all the senses in the construction of reality.² Challenging logocentrism does not entail the impossible task of avoiding words in analysis; rather, it requires that we use them as signs that do not colonize social reality but instead traffic across the different sensorial and semantic fields that constitute it.

The essays trace the social life of different types of photos in Argentina, Mexico, and Guatemala. In “Family Photos, Oral Narratives, and Identity Formation: The Ukrainians of Berisso,” Daniel James and Mirta Zaido Lobato examine personal snapshots of Ukrainian immigrants to Argentina and argue that, in conjunction with oral narratives, these photos helped sustain their identities by linking the privately familiar to the publicly national. In “An Image of ‘Our Indian’: Type Photographs and Racial Sentiments in Oaxaca, 1920–1940,” Deborah Poole analyzes type photographs from postrevolutionary Mex-

My gratitude to Katherine Worboys, whose own work on photography has influenced my understanding of this subject, and to Genese Sodikoff, for help editing these comments.

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986).

2. Nadia C. Serematakis, ed., *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory As Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994).

Hispanic American Historical Review 84:1

Copyright 2004 by Duke University Press

ico that celebrated the unity in diversity of Oaxacans. She suggests that they sustained a plural conception of collective identity that stood in conflict with an alternative vision of national identity that was to be constructed as homogeneously mestizo. In “Can the Subaltern Be Seen? Photography and the Affects of Nationalism,” Greg Grandin interprets a large collection of portraits of K’iche’ Mayans taken by a single photographer. He identifies a complex and multiaccented language of identity that helped shape an alternative nationalism based on the regeneration of Mayan culture in highland Guatemala.

Before the tremendous power of images, the articles collectively seem disposed to follow Poole’s examination of photos as “sedimentations” or “materializations” of discourses of ethnic, racial, and national identity. Grandin’s epigraph is a quote from Poole about the ability “that both visual ideologies and visual technologies have to sediment and materialize the abstract and frequently contradictory discourses of racial, ethnic, and class identity that criss-cross our own lives as they do those of the photographer’s Andean subjects.” The articles recognize that visual texts, as James and Lobato suggest, also inform and sustain discourses and practices of multiple identities. Images do not simply reflect identities, but help constitute them. The three essays confirm the central insight of Trachtenberg’s landmark *Reading American Photographs*: “Photographs are not simple depictions, but constructions.” As such, “the history they show is inseparable from the history they enact.”³

The authors negotiate this tension between the reflective and performative roles of images by attending to their distinct social biographies. Photographic types are part of public contests over identity, and their meanings can be encountered in this larger field. Studio portraits follow international standards but reveal local specificities through their appropriations and transculturations. Snapshots, like most candid photographs, are forged in idiosyncratic private domains, which in turn are shaped by culturally specific understandings of the private. These essays reveal not just what, but how, photos show what they show. While visual perception is ultimately personal, the organization of perception is public; the traffic in images takes place through multiple visual conventions and different intensities of public control.

In different ways, these articles do not so much *see* photos as *see through* them. Treating them less as mirrors of history than as windows into it, they offer us glimpses into struggles and anxieties over the construction of identities during historical transformations. If by a magical click photos may lift discrete

3. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images As History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), xvi.

moments out of history, the magic of scholarship may reinscribe these moments into history, rendering it palpably visible. While the articles struggle hard to respect the opacity of the medium, conceding that photos cannot be reduced to words, they ultimately offer accounts of the photographs' meanings through analyses of their circulation and their interpretation by various audiences.

Just as the translation of a written text from one language into another may yield numerous versions, images can also occasion a wide range of interpretations. If the pitfalls of translations are captured by the motto "translator, traitor," these articles made me think of its inverse: "translator, creator." The authors expand historical archives through disciplined creativity. They exemplify the "historiographical operation," so aptly described by Michel de Certeau, through which historians produce documents and texts by setting aside, collecting, and interpreting materials not previously considered "historical sources." As de Certeau argues, "In history everything begins with the gesture of *setting aside*, of putting together, of transforming certain classified objects into 'documents.'"⁴ These essays turn photos—collections of photos—into documents and offer a sophisticated reading of these documents by striking a productive balance between treating images as texts and analyzing the contexts of their production and circulation.

The essays make it evident that images do not so much "show" history as provide a site for the struggle over its meaning. As Trachtenberg argues, what "empowers an image to represent history is not just what it shows, but the struggle for meaning we undergo before it, a struggle analogous to the historian's effort to shape an intelligible and usable past."⁵ Approaching the unobservable through the observable, photos serve as clues to the past. They partake in the formation of a semantic paradigm developed in the nineteenth century that, according to Carlo Ginzburg, established a distinction between surface appearance and inner reality bridged by the presence of "clues." But like psychoanalysis, Marxism, geology, detective novels, statistics, and other cultural formations identified by Ginzburg as part of this paradigm, photos can only function as clues in terms of the specific theoretical schemes that orient "the historian's effort to shape an intelligible and usable past."⁶

As clues to history, photos are sights/sites that reflect and refract the social

4. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 72.

5. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, xvii.

6. Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992).

contests over meaning that give rise to them. Like the semiotic signs discussed by V. N. Volosinov, visual texts become arenas of social struggle. It is by the “multiaccentuality” of the ideological sign, by becoming sites of “intersecting accents,” that “a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development.”⁷ Its form and meanings are thus unfathomable without attention to the struggles that generate it. Acknowledging photos as signs of creative contests over meaning involves making visible not only dominant visual ideologies but also their subversive appropriations. Grandin’s concern about whether subaltern actors can “be seen” raises the larger question of whether they “can see.” In my view, Gayatri Spivak’s point is not that the “subaltern cannot speak,” but that subaltern voices are muted by the languages of the powerful.⁸ While recognizing the limits encountered by subaltern actors, the aim of a critical perspective is to avoid reproducing the silencing effect of domination. Just as it must seek to “listen” to the muted voices of subaltern actors, it must also attempt to “see” their visions by recognizing the traces of their accents in cultural landscapes largely shaped by “imperial eyes.”

Often treated as a metaphor for a perspective, the eye should also be taken literally as an organ of perception. Visual texts do not simply express the activity of the seeing eye but also shape it as an organ of vision. Marx argued that the senses are organs of history, in the double sense of being produced by history and of making history possible and intelligible. The discussion of imagery and visual ideologies should therefore direct us to observing not just the visions of imperial and subaltern subjects, but their constitution as historical actors. As these articles demonstrate, an encounter with their activity should educate our eyes so that we can render their visions visible and acknowledge their presence as distinct historical subjects.

7. V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 23.

8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994).