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## PHOTOGRAPHY AND EMPIRE: LANDSCAPES FOR A MODERN BRAZIL

Natalia Brizuela. 2012.  
*Fotografia e Império: paisagens para  
um Brasil moderno*. São Paulo,  
Companhia das Letras, 248p.

In the work titled *Photography and empire: landscapes for a Modern Brazil*, Natalia Brizuela (2012) presents the reader with an overview of nineteenth-century Brazil from photographs, stating that these records were intensely present in the construction of the national imaginary. Thus, it indicates an important relation between the photographs of this period and the configuration of the Brazilian territory during the reign of D. Pedro II, commenting on the photography coinvention by Hercule Florence, the abolition of the slavery and the formation of the New Republic.

The author reflects on the relationships between the photographic field and the socio-historical context from which it emerges, mainly through the portrait (whose people are the central theme) and the landscape (scenarios in which people may also be inserted), two important genres that marked the beginning of the photographic practice. For that, Brizuela highlights two figures as potential types of photographers in Imperial Brazil. The first is the traveler-photographer, a landscape-related character responsible for portraying the main Brazilian cities (Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Salvador), offering an atlas of the country through the photographic image. The lover-photographer, on the other hand, consists of a portraitist able to identify those who are absent through visual memory, an act linked at the same time to the order of the affective, the invisible and

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarship of the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Fapesp).

the imaginary: “An atlas of space and an atlas of emotion, aggregated by a ‘scientific art’” (ibid., 39).

Thus, Brizuela composes his book with a prologue and four essays of images that dialogue with the text. In this sense, although the photographs appear throughout the work in small size and accompanied by explanatory legends, they are reviewed in good resolution in the beautiful booklet located at the end of the work, which is fundamental to understand the author’s reflections, whose intent is to understand the photographs as cultural products that constitute “not objective and very magical maps”<sup>2</sup> from Brazil (Ibid., 15).

In the first essay, Brizuela examines the ways in which the Second Empire (1840-1889) used the photography to implant the project of constructing a geographic imagination of the new colony and developing a nationalistic feeling. In this context, photography will be associated with the art of cartography, the official project of Romanticism and the work of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGB), showing a relationship between the cultural development of the Second Empire under the regency of D. Pedro II, and the arrival and consolidation of the photography in Brazil.

The images in the first chapter show the reader the so-called views, a name given to nineteenth-century landscape photographs showing Brazil with a nature apparently unexplored by man, which needed to be made public. However, Brizuela draws attention to the fact that these photographs are never the object itself, that is, “there is no landscape before a human subject can configure it as such” (ibid., 26). For the author, the views constitute as places built by the photographers to be seen, either by the choice of a frame or by the presence of a human figure, who appears in the middle of the wild scenery. Such apparitions make us distrustful of images in that sense, “because we now know that photography is not only nature imprinting itself, but the product of a subjective observer” (ibid., 30).

After offering the reader these views, the author begins the second essay establishing a counterpoint to the first chapter of the book, which is composed of the official history of the arrival of photography in Brazil, imported from Europe with the help of D. Pedro II<sup>3</sup>. Now the central axis is

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2 Even if, paradoxically, the photographic ontology is linked to an ideal of objectivity, that is, it consists of a technique elaborated thanks to the advances of rationalization and science. In this sense, photography would be halfway to art and science, as shown in the book *Entre arte e ciência: a fotografia na antropologia*, organized by Sylvia Caiuby Novaes (2015).

3 D. Pedro II, a great admirer and collector of photographs, organized a set of 25 thousand images of all kinds: portraits, landscapes, urban views, astronomy, biology, zoology, etc.

no longer the images produced in the nuclei of the colonial court, but the photographic experiments of Hercule Florence, a Brazilian based in Brazil who “invented”, in the town of São Carlos (present-day city of Campinas, São Paulo), a method of solar printing to establish a commercial reproduction technique. Brizuela shows that the first efforts of Florence resulted in the year 1833 in a copy of commercial labels of a pharmacy, which the author himself called photography, pointing to the use of photography as a consumer good<sup>4</sup>, a commodity aiming at reproducibility.

This difference in use is clear with the first two photographs presented in the second chapter and which were exposed on the same page (Ibid., 63). The first is called the “City Hall” (Rio de Janeiro, 1840), a daguerreotype made by Father Louis Compte; considered the first image produced from this technique in Brazil, it shows a scene of the palace that housed D. Pedro I and D. Pedro II, an urban symbol of the Empire. The second is an image of Florence (dated 1839) that resembles more a drawing or a print, and the impression of direct reality is absent. However, Brizuela points out that both are photographs and attempts to re-enact the world, either by constructing an imperial urban imaginary or by revealing a history that happened at the margin of the courts, far from the centers of power of the country<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, Brizuela narrates the context of the production of the images of Florence, who came to Brazil to work as a naturalist painter in the scientific expedition of Baron Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff (1825-1829), in which he was hired to draw and catalog the scenarios and new specimens of animals and plants found. With the intention of reproducing a manuscript he had written during his participation in the expedition, Florence encountered technical difficulties, since the only printing company in the São Paulo region refused to publish such a work, which encouraged him to develop a new method of more democratic impression. “Photographie: a way of printing images that arose from disenchantment with the observation of nature” (Ibid., 75). Therefore, Florence’s *photographie* consisted of a return to rational techniques, since it was the result of a chemical/physical process; it also derived from a longing for authenticity and creation, reviving the distinctions between original/copy and nature/culture, and anticipating classical discussions for both photography and anthropology.

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4 Boris Kossoy (2006), in the book *Hercule Florence: a descoberta isolada da fotografia no Brasil*, claims the importance of the experiments that Florence realized with silver nitrate, including coining and using the term *photographie* for the first time, in 1833.

5 In addition, the author emphasizes that the Florence *photographie* presented formal similarities (such as the frameworks that emphasize human intervention from a point of view) with the first photographic images produced by Niépce, Daguerre and Talbot, considered the pioneers of the practice in Europe.

Already in the third essay, Brizuela returns to the images produced in the space of the colonial court. Now the author shows the reader that enslaved black people were portrayed in Empire photographs as racial “types.” In this way, he affirms that such images cannot be seen “only” as conventional portraits, but as signs of slavery and as a way of understanding the organization of Brazilian space of the time. Brizuela is part of the study of the so-called *cartes de visite* or *timbres-poste* (postage stamps), produced in the 1860s, which showed slaves posing in studios of the Brazilian capital, Rio de Janeiro then, during daily activities. Such photographs were sold as souvenirs of the tropical lands, a kind of souvenir for European travelers who showed the “types” of slaves of Brazil. This form of appropriation coincides with the uses of photography in Europe, including the anthropometric practices of the nineteenth century, which emphasized a cataloging of human “specimens”, a cultural cartography indicative of the superiority of the white man.

Brizuela highlights the existence of what he called the “triumvirate” of portrait photography, made up of portraitist, model and observer, a relation that exposes important and profound revelations. Be it in the woman of Stahl’s portrait (Ibid., 109), who looks at the camera showing the photographer the marks on her face and the front teeth, evidence of slave status; or in the images of Christiano Júnior (Ibid., 136) that portrayed scenes of work of the enslaved wearing clothes typical of the representation of black in the Brazilian visual culture of the time, what can be known by these images is part of what is recorded in the photograph, but leads to another place, intrinsically related to the Brazilian sociocultural context.

In this way, the author pursues clues, intimacies and secrets of photographic images. And it causes us to do the same, saying that we do not know, for example, the names of the characters, their ages or countries of origin. From this meticulous work, the reader is invited to dive into the photos and see beyond the surface of the paper, when considering the purpose for which the photograph was taken and its circulation. In this sense, Brizuela emphasizes that if we take these images as “simple” portraits, they will be no more than “still life”, with a capacity for alienation that offers not the capture of reality and a fragment of life, but a petrified object (Ibid., 123).

When thinking about the production and circulation relations of the *cartes-de-visite*, Brizuela exposes a crucial moment in Brazilian cultural history, which consists of the beginning of the abolitionist period<sup>6</sup>.

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6 The Eusébio de Queirós Law, in 1850, prohibited the slave trade. In 1871, the Law of the Free Womb was enacted, which considered free all the children of enslaved women born from that moment. In 1888, Princess Isabel, regent of the Brazilian Empire, signed the Golden Law that

These photographs present the work of black people displaced from a landscape and its context, an erasure of the image of these subjects that is directly associated with the end of the slave trade and the monarchy in Brazil. It is from this analysis that the author connects with the last essay of the book, in which she displays images of the photographer Flávio de Barros, produced in the context of the Canudos War, in 1897.

Unlike the images shown in the previous chapter (produced in the sanitized environment of the photographic studios of the court) and the photographs exposed in the first chapter (produced to highlight the exotic monarchic ideal of the tropics), Barros' images depict scenes that are devastated and distant from fantasy the photographic representation of colonial Brazil. They are displayed to answer an important question: "Where was, then, tropical Brazil?" (Ibid., 151).

In fact, these ruins picture make up for Brizuela a new kind of "still life", produced to show the evidence of the relentless battle between modern man and the hostile environment of the northeastern hinterland. On the one hand, the technology did not allow the photographs to be taken during the combat, in "real time", because the long expositions made it impossible to capture the movements on the battlefield, on the other, Barros photographed only the scenes commissioned by the commanders of the troops, because he was hired by the military of the New Republic to register the victory against Antonio Conselheiro, messianic leader from Canudos and seen as a monarchist rebel.

When talking about the pictures made by Flavio de Barros, Brizuela also introduces another important character of the Canudos War: Euclides da Cunha, charged with going to the region of armed conflict to photograph and produce written accounts; initially a fervent supporter of the republican regime, which can be seen in the first two parts of his literary masterpiece, *Os sertões* (1902/2002)<sup>7</sup>. However, the author points out that, after going through more than six hundred pages of the book, when describing the climax of the war, the journalist interrupts the narrative and turns to the prolonged description of a photograph, as if distrusting its supposed objectivity and, consequently, the republican ideal.

Thus, Euclides describes the moment in which the army, through the official photographer Flávio de Barros, portrays the mortal remains of Antônio Conselheiro, being such image the symbol that the country definitively extinguished the monarchical ideal, transposed to the figure

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abolished slavery. On November 15, 1889, the Republic of Brazil was officially proclaimed.

<sup>7</sup> The book *Os sertões: campanha de Canudos* (1902/2002) is divided into three parts: "The earth", "the man" and "the fight".

of the messianic leader (Ibid., 181). Photography once again transformed the human body into a souvenir, as was the case with the enslaved Brazilians who served as models for the *cartes-de-visite*. At first glance, this image portrays a man in quiet sleep, arms folded across his chest, head turned, eyes barely visible between hair and beard. But Brizuela draws attention to the details of the image by saying that the body is not in the shade of a tree and that the terrain around it shows that it is not a person at rest, but a corpse in the arid soil of the hinterland.

On the same point, Brizuela still constructs an important relation between the image of Antônio Conselheiro and the portraits of D. Pedro II, who is always shown “like an old man, even when he was still in his twenties” (Ibid., 183), with a large beard and an imposing physique. Thus, the author interprets the image of Conselheiro: a man also older and with a large beard, but whose body is fragile and lifeless, as the symmetrically inverted figure of the emperor, which represents “the final death of sovereignty of the monarch” (ibid., 183).

Thus, in relating the images of the War of Canudos with those of the Second Empire, Brizuela again emphasizes the polysemy of photography, capable of constructing very different imaginaries. Be it in the visual construction of a wild country with an inhospitable nature; in the view of an arid hinterland where progress needs to enter and control; in the photographs at once technical and magical of Florence, who tell a story on the banks of the Empire; or as a means to establish the symbolism of slavery in Brazil, Brizuela’s book brings together and causes contradictory sensations: objectivity and subjectivity, presence and representation, appearance and disappearance, a way to both disenchant and re-enact nature and the world.

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