BOOK REVIEWS

American Viewfinder

Reading National Geographic. CATHERINE A. LUTZ and JANE L. COLLINS. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993. xviii, 309 pp., illus. $59.95 or £47.95; paper, $19.95 or £15.95.

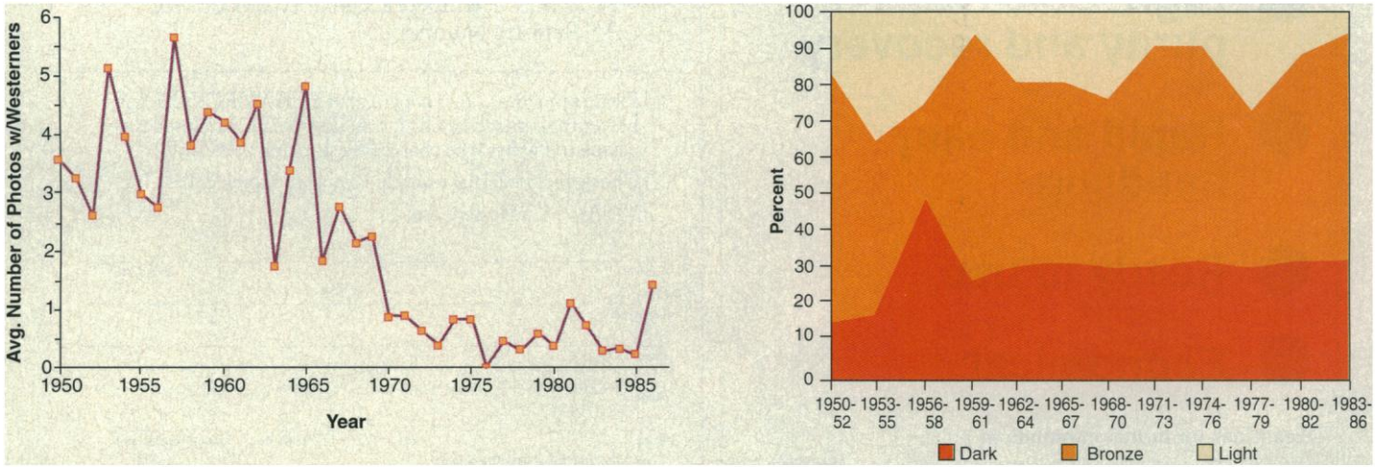
The first thing you will probably want to do after you read *Reading National Geographic* is find some copies of the magazine and take another look. If you do read the magazine from time to time—or are one of the 53 percent who Lutz and Collins tell us only read the picture captions—you will certainly view it in a different light after you have learned what goes on behind the scenes at the National Geographic Society.

In *Reading National Geographic*, Lutz and Collins, anthropologists motivated by concern with the origins of Americans' perceptions of other cultures, examine the history, philosophy, and political agendas that shape the monthly issues of the country's third most popular magazine. They particularly point out the strong influence of the nearby White House as reflected in the geographic and thematic coverage in the magazine. The lack of coverage of the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1959 and of the People's Republic of China between 1950 and 1978 is no coincidence, the authors note, given the prevailing mood in Washington, D.C., the home of the National Geographic Society. In discussing the pattern of coverage of Vietnam and surrounding countries, Lutz and Collins reiterate, "The eye of the *National Geographic* has tended in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, to follow the interested gaze of Washington" (p 129).

The "interested gaze" of Washington, as interpreted by the *National Geographic*, is in the direction of assuring the American public that the world—and their role in it—is fundamentally kind and noncontroversial. *Reading National Geographic* examines the ideologies on which the magazine was founded and which have more or less persisted despite occasional challenges, particularly in the 1970s. We learn that, in 1915, Gilbert Grosvenor established "seven principles" that underline the importance of avoiding controversial topics and focusing only on "what is of a kindly nature." In brief, the seven points are: "absolute accuracy"; "abundance of beautiful, instructive, and artistic illustrations"; "permanent value"; "all personalities and notes of a trivial character . . . avoided"; "nothing of a partisan or controversial character"; "only what is of a kindly nature . . . everything unpleasant or unduly critical being avoided"; and "contents . . . planned with a view of being timely" (pp. 26–27). The magazine has since become an institution that has let Americans see the world without having to face up to the hardships suffered in many of the "picture perfect" countries portrayed. It has achieved this, according to Lutz and Collins, by presenting a world that is "comfortable to contemplate" (p. 103).

The focus of *Reading National Geographic* is actually more on pictures than on words. Though Lutz and Collins discuss how articles are initiated and produced—including the ways in which the photographers, editors, and writers interact (or don't interact)—their main interest seems to be in how *Geographic* photography situates itself in a category of its own—not commercial, not news journalism, not art photography, sort-of documentary but devoid of social commentary. The tacit commentary that Lutz and Collins point out in the magazine is as much in the absence as in the presence of certain images.

The authors have interviewed several *Geographic* photographers as well as other editorial staff about the photographers and their approach. We learn that there is "a clear distinction between photographers and the rest of the staff. Photographers are seen as renegades, somewhat quirky" (p. 69). Although the photographers may be seen as renegades, their work—or at least the photographs that make it into the magazine—follows the same no-controversy, kindliness rules that govern the articles and captions. In fact, it seems something of a waste of resources to provide the almost unlimited funds used to get the photographers to the remotest locations and into tenuous situa-



Content analysis of the *National Geographic*, 1950–1986. (Left) Average number per article of photographs with Westerners in non-Western settings. "In the heyday of colonial culture, the inclusion of Westerners in the photographs of the colonized served to establish a sort of authenticity—to demonstrate that the photographer was 'really there.' By the late 1960s, . . . colonial and postcolonial relationships had become a site of struggle, and reference to them was studiously avoided." (Right) Skin color in photographs. "Individuals coded as black were most likely to be depicted in high levels of activity—engaged in strenuous work or athletics. People coded white were most likely to be engaged in low-level activity— . . . perhaps manipulating something with their hands, but rarely exerting themselves. Those coded bronze were most likely to be found somewhere between the two extremes, such as walking or herding animals." [Adapted from *Reading National Geographic*]

tions with no restrictions on the amount of film they are provided with, only to have them come home to an editor who must abide by rules of "balance" and conservative concerns about not offending the largely white, middle-class readership. Lutz and Collins write, "At the *Geographic*, balance is pursued most assiduously in photo selection. . . . As one editor put it, 'It behooves us to show reality—and nothing is all bad or all good. If [the photographer] didn't find any happy people, I'd tell him to go back and find them' " (p. 65). The authors also describe the photo editors' concerns that certain photographs might be too "strong." The editors "refer to disturbing pictures . . . as strong or tough. Strong pictures are dangerous because they may offend some viewers or may be seen as inappropriate for children." To the editors the authors talked to "the inverse of strong photographs was not 'weak' but 'balanced' " (p. 71). When the pictures themselves cannot reach the "balance" wanted, the caption writers are called on to influence how the photographs are read.

Photo captions and their writers deserve more attention than the few pages they are given in *Reading National Geographic*. The captions direct the readers' attention within each picture and often reveal more about the current historical and political context than do the photographs. There is a timelessness about *Geographic* photographs. Captions are more time-bound, as Lutz and Collins suggest in their look at how captions have been changed under photographs reprinted years after their original publication. Later in the book, the authors discuss interviews they have conducted with readers regarding various pictures from the magazine. There is good reason to gather feedback about the photographs without captions to bias the responses, but given the authors' concern with how the current political and economic context influences the magazine, some interviews centering on captioned versions of the same pictures might have provided valuable insights into how the captions direct the meaning found in an otherwise "objective" image.

Lutz and Collins's interviews about the pictures alone, though, provide an insight into the world view of white Americans—or at least those interviewed. While the interviews were aimed at understanding how the *Geographic* has influenced its readers' world views, the interviewers also heard stereotyped views of and attitudes toward the non-Western world that have been shaped by the media at large. The *Geographic's* marketing surveys have in revealing these views to the magazine editors reinforced their conception of what their readers like to hear (and see). One of the things we learn that readers like about the magazine is that it lets them look at the world and "it doesn't seem to be politicized too much" (interviewee, p. 229). It also offers an easy way to become "cultured," or at least look cultured. As one interviewee commented, "I think that's why people read it—because they want to learn about different cultures . . . either that or they want to throw it on their coffee table when company comes over, and think they know about it . . . It shows that they're cultural people, that are interested in other cultures, and that's good" (p. 232).

Perhaps having *Reading National Geographic* on your coffee table would put you even higher in the "cultured" category the next time you want to impress your guests.

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Vignette: Monetary Rewards

Australia takes a great pride in her scientific pioneers. Consider the paper currency. On the two-dollar note we found William Farrer, agricultural experimenter, with his sheaves of wheat. The five-dollar note carried scientific progenitor Sir Joseph Banks encrusted about with many of the sturdy banksia species to which he lent his name. The 100-dollar note commemorates the Australian born 19th century astronomer John Tebbutt . . . , together with the South Australian geologist, Sir Douglas Mawson . . . . The 20-dollar note shows the remarkable aeronautical experimenter Lawrence Hargrave . . . . With the 50-dollar note science shines again. We have entered the 20th century with two Australian scientists on either side: the medical scientist Sir Howard Florey whose work on the development of penicillin earned him a Nobel prize, and the veterinary scientist Sir Ian Clunies Ross, Chairman from 1949-59 of Australia's great government scientific organisation, the CSIRO.

—*Ann Moyal*, in *A Bright and Savage Land* (Penguin reprint of a work originally subtitled "Scientists in Colonial Australia")

A Success in India

In Pursuit of Excellence. A History of the Indian Institute of Science. B. V. SUBBARAYAPPA. Tata McGraw-Hill, New Delhi, 1992. xiv, 426 pp. + plates and maps. $11.50.

"In Pursuit of Excellence" is an apt title for a history of the Indian Institute of Science. Located in Bangalore, a well-laid-out city in south India renowned for its many institutions of higher learning and high-tech industries as well as for its salubrious climate and beautiful parks, the Institute is a place where students competitively selected on the basis of merit from across the country receive instruction at the highest level and research is conducted at the frontiers of science and technology.

Subbarayappa has succeeded in presenting a fascinating story of an institution that can claim, with considerable justification, to be the leading scientific and educational establishment in India. The Institute owes its origins to the foresightedness of the late-19th-century industrialist and philanthropist Jamsetji Tata. Anticipating the needs of India as a modern nation, Tata conceived the idea of an institute of science and technology entirely devoted to postgraduate research and teaching and backed the endeavor with both his personal energies and a munificent material endowment.

The book gives a detailed account of Tata's family history; the prevailing climate in the public life and in the government of India, then a part of the British Empire; Tata's interaction with famous contemporaries such as the legendary Swami Vivekananda and Lord Curzon, the outstanding viceroy who firmly believed in the eternal British Raj; the numerous ups and downs and committees involved in the planning of the project; and finally, in 1909, the opening of the Institute, fully five years after Tata's death. The trials and tribulations of the Institute's formative years under the first three directors, all British, and the appointment in 1933 of C. V. Raman (1930 Nobel Prize winner for his discovery of the Raman effect) as the first Indian director are recounted in a compelling manner. Raman's ambitious plans to make the Institute preeminent by international standards, his success in establishing a world-class physics department where highly significant discoveries were made, his singular lack of success in