

Analysis of Jimmy Nelson's *Before They Pass Away*:
The never-ending myth of the *savage*
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Abstract: This paper deciphers the linguistic speech of the photographic work of Jimmy Nelson "Before They Pass Away" to understand the modern stereotype applied on so-called "non-western" smaller societies. The thesis is that there is continuity within the myth (in a Bathesian sense) of the "tribe" since the first eighteenth-century philosophical productions on anthropological questions despite the acceleration of the globalization process. The analysis divides the speech into two paradoxical movements: firstly, an alienation and exoticization of the tribes portrayed by Nelson to enhance the feeling of strangeness. Secondly, there is a rapprochement and naturalization that reinforces the Universalist idea of a shared human nature. Methodologically, the analysis combines both content analysis and semiotic analysis in the images and the text of Nelson's work. What comes out of the analysis is that the representation portrayed by Nelson has the same structure than that of the philosophical works of the Enlightenment. The essay opens then questions: what has globalisation done in the understanding of the other? Has primitivism been overpassed?

Key words: *race; mass-media; otherness; stereotype; tribe*

"The purity of humanity exists. It is there in the mountains, the ice fields, the jungle, along the rivers and in the valleys." These words introduce Jimmy Nelson's *Before They Pass Away* (2013); a collection of photographs which aim is to preserve the memory of the last traditional "tribes" before they completely disappear.

The Universalist account of a deep essence common to mankind has often been described by the term of nature. But there is a close and ambiguous link made between common characteristics that would define mankind called Human Nature and the presence, threatening or protective, of natural fauna and flora. The classical dichotomy between nature and culture as the basic structure of human society (MacCormack and Strathern, 1980) came from the very evident and yet astonishing evidence that very little relates us to these people in distance parts of the world, except for the fact that they are, too, people. The enlightenment was a period rich in the philosophical understanding of the otherness, and core-questions like: what makes us define these two very different individuals as the same? How deep is their difference and how solid their similarities? It is probably during the 18th century that the idea that under the thick shell called culture lays an undeniable truth about us. But why would the very essence of human beings be more tangible in a wild natural space?

The rise of disciplines like ethnography, anthropology and even phrenology were a positivist approach for the same type of questions. But an epistemological bias occurred at the early

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practice of these disciplines, for they were built on the assumption that there is, in fact, a primitive, basic, common core to all humans and that it is by the analyse of other forms of society that the “nature” of mankind will appear. A process of essentialization of these societies was inevitable since it was the sole prism used to deconstruct cultural and symbolic structures.

Nowadays, there still a quest to *understand* the other, however anthropology has evolved and tries to understand (and no longer classify) the other. Also, there was an acceleration in the process of globalisation since the 18th century and the communication between individuals around the planet poses few technical problems. The democratisation of knowledge by the expansion of mass media also helped to give the impression of the “shrink” of the planet. The success of the National Geographic Magazine, the Geographical Magazine, and many other mass-media publications, TV series and motion pictures about the diversity in the world prove that there still being an interest on the “other”. It is, we will suppose, of a different nature to that of Diderot’s interest in the “savages”. And yet, there is very little these magazines actually do to create dialogue. As Linda Steet (2000) notes, at the centennial of the National Geographic Magazine, the general discourse was that of the pride of the achievements and of the unchanging character of the magazine. There seems then to be continuity in the mass media perception of the other, a one-directional discourse. How much can the perception of something evolve if it remains impermeable to the information that sent back?

The aim of this paper is to deconstruct Jimmy Nelson’s language elements used to represent the “tribes” he photographed in his recent book. With a clearer view of the discourse used in this particular work, we will be able to compare it to a more large and general fantasy around the quest of human essence and to have a better idea of the modern representation of the *other*. Jimmy Nelson’s collection of photographs of twenty-nine “tribes” within forty-four countries took three years to be completed and it is available as a book and as a website (the content being identical in both supports). Each chapter (also called “journey”) is introduced by a short text, as well as each photograph. Methodologically, the analysis made in this paper combines content analysis and semiotic analysis of both images and text. The speech (in a semiotic sense, the “use of language resources for particular acts” – Ali, 2004 -) of Nelson’s work is deconstructed in two paradoxical movements. Firstly, a stress of the differences to the other through a strategy of *exoticization* and, secondly, a movement of rapprochement through a “naturalisation” of the tribes photographed. These two movements will be compared with the general representation of the *other* in broader socio-historical perspective.

The first element of the speech that appears in a quantitative analysis of the use of words is the strangeness created between the reader/viewer and the different societies presented. There is a geographical remoteness and *exoticization* as well as a particular presentation of the ethnographical work in itself.

The extensive use of the word “tribe” to refer to the societies studied is striking. In the general part of the chapter about Ethiopia, it is possible to count nine times the word “tribe(s)” and five times “tribal”, eight times the word “people”; once “tribespeople” and once “ethnicity”. The words “society” or “culture” never appear. There is a strong connotation associated to the term “tribe” linked to its denotation: to Peter Claus Wolfgang (2007) a tribe is a whole self-sufficient society with simple technology, no writing nor literature, politically autonomous and with a common culture and identity. With this strict yet broad sense, there are practically no more tribes in

the world for the simple reason that every piece of inhabited land is claimed by a state. Furthermore, complete self-sufficiency is extremely rare. The extensive use of the word “tribe”



Fig. 1: “Two Maori women”

Source: Jimmy Nelson, *Before They Pass Away*

helps to enhance any difference between a complex and “developed” society and the “basic” organisation of a smaller society. In the same spirit, the maps used to illustrate the description of the “journeys” show no borders, as if the world was not yet occupied and politically divided: a wild world. Paradoxically, there is a division of the tribes’ origins per countries.

Strictly concerning the photographs, one soon realises that there is a full *mise-en-scène* behind the pictures. In the first place, no matter what the “tribe” is, all the subjects are dressed and body-painted according to their traditions. However, how authentic is that? In a very brief description, Nelson describes the traditional costume of the Gauchos and explains that it is not their everyday clothes. The same might happen with other societies that are portrayed with their most typical and exotic dresses, even if it is worn rarely. But the pictures just give a caricaturized portrait of their appearance. This is the most visible aspect of the reproduction of a stereotyping for the stereotype is a definition, given to a certain group, with such pressure that it becomes almost irresistible to changes (Downing and Husband, 2005). Also, the attitudes of the subjects of the pictures are very dramatic. The following picture (Fig. 1) shows two women standing in front of a waterfall in a defiant attitude. It corresponds to the same stereotypical image of the savage in the 18th century: wild, natural, aggressive and strange. The pictures also stress on the transformation of the body: tattoos, body paintings, and piercings. All this creates an atmosphere of mystery and

strangeness that stress the difference and the rareness of the societies portrayed. The stereotype of the “tribe” is then reinforced.

In the second place, the view over the photographic work in itself is victim of a fantasy inspired by the stereotype of the nineteenth century explorer and anthropologist, “the romanticized task of ‘fill-in the black’ on the map” as Tamar Y. Rothenberg (2007) describes it. The repetitive use of the term “journey” for example, is closer to the idea of adventure than that of fieldwork. Nelson built a whole universe of the expedition that helps to create a geographical and cognitive distance between the reader and the subjects of the pictures. The logic being that, since the subject portrayed is distant, it must be different. Jules Verne or Emilio Salgari used the same strategy in their novels to create an appealing distance to their stories. That occurred in the 19th century. The subject of the picture, then, really becomes *other*, as he’s inaccessible and exists in *strange* lands. The descriptions of the “fieldwork” have more in common with a hunting anecdote than with an ethnographical work:

“Travelling by jeep through Omo Valley, from the riverbanks, the highlands, down to the Kenyan border, we came across 5 different tribes. But shooting in Ethiopia wasn’t easy. Tribes like the Banna, Karo and Mursi can be quite intimidating” (Nelson, 2013).

Even the use of the word “shooting” can be misunderstood... Also, in all the descriptions, there are many words related to the space (mostly natural references) and distance, but there are very few names of precise places and exact location, which creates an even bigger effect of distance. However, to have a fair analyse of the book, it is important to highlight that Nelson’s main concern is artistic and not so anthropological. This is why Nelson chose to record in very different and varied parts of the planet instead of working in depth in a specific zone. Nevertheless, the localisations show a Eurocentric representation (conscious or unconscious) of the rare “tribes” at “world’s end”. When we look into a euro-centred world map of his “journeys”, it is striking how the locations are consistently close to the edges of the map. This, again, shows how the photographic work is biased from the very start.

The speech created to look at the other tribes, then, causes to alienate the subject portrayed



Fig. 2: “Himba women”

Source: Jimmy Nelson, *Before They Pass Away*

and stress the fact that “*they are not like us*”. However, the speech also considers the relation of “the same” (here, the photographer, western man) with the “other”. For example, there are many anecdotes of the time Nelson spent with the tribes. Roland Barthes’s analyse of the “Myth of the Human Community” (1957) as he calls the form the stereotype of the “other” takes, is also composed by a second and paradoxical part of the representation of the other: there is a rapprochement to the strange; a comparison must also look for the similarities.

The second part of the present work will then focus on how the idea of the unity of the human species in its nature is expressed in Nelson’s work. According to Barthes, the Myth of the Human Community rests in the fact that the differences are visible, but there is a deep human nature that binds us all. What’s more, Diderot saw “civilisation” and “society” as a depravity of human nature (Tinguely, 2006), so “savages” must be a purest form of humanity and closest to the essence of all human being. The same idea persists in the speech on Nelson’s work. There is a naturalisation of the “tribes” portrayed that reminds a sort of quest for the origins. This naturalization passes through the timelessness and the essentializing gaze on them.

The timelessness is visually created with the huge presence of natural landscapes. All the outdoor photographs have in common a predominance of the landscape, even if the purpose of the work is to document the people living there, which can seem contradictory. The natural landscape gives no time mark so the vagueness of the stereotype is conserved: stereotypes do not have to be logical and complete, but only psychologically coherent (Downing and Husband, 2005). Therefore, the incomplete parts don’t always fit the reality. Here, the stereotype isn’t challenged because of the vagueness of the spaces used. The importance of nature is also close to Diderot’s vision of the *sauvages*. There is a link made between simple societies and nature, as if these societies were closer to nature and less determined by their culture as the “western” societies. This “naturalisation” continues with the idea of time: nature doesn’t progress, it may evolve at a very slow rhythm, but there is not a direction like progress.

Also, in the description of the tribes, one can find repeatedly the vague mention of the hundreds of thousands of years the “tribe” has being living here:

“The Omo Valley, situated in Africa’s Great Rift Valley, is home to an estimated 200,000 tribal people who have lived there for millennia”.

The time mark is not only extremely vague, but the way it is used is very problematic, for it could imply that the tribe hasn’t change since the first people got there. The “tribes” are then not just different from us, they are older. See them, appears suddenly as if we were watching back in time. These people would then be just like us, without all the superfluous noises of our society. At least that’s the message transmitted. Indeed, in the overall presentation of the work as well as in every particular “tribe” description, the reader doesn’t have the sort of “superfluous noise” of History, nor the one of politics. There is no mention of the evolution of the “tribes”, the influence of other societies, of colonialism and modern History. There is very little mention of their political organisation, but nothing about the influence the state of the country has on them. These cultures are abstracted of from the rest of the world, they seem to belong elsewhere. In the nineteenth century, this aspect of the stereotype could be plausible because of the low level of globalization. If it seems more difficult to sustain the same idea nowadays, this work proofs that the image persists.

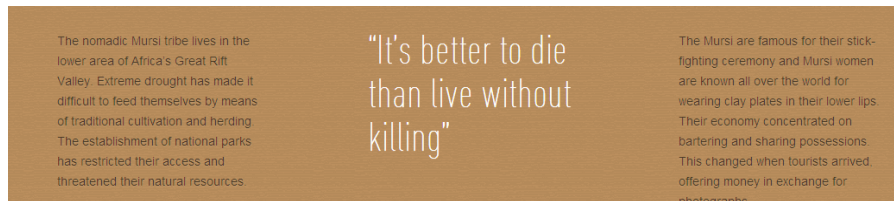


Fig. 3: Visual excerpt of the “Ethiopia” journey
 Source: Jimmy Nelson, *Before They Pass Away*

The essentializing look on the subjects portrayed completes the universalism of the Myth of the Human Community. It passes through the use of short quotes in present tense. The tense expresses a general truth, a universal and ancestral knowledge (Fig. 3). By the way it is presented it seems that these quotes summarize the way of thinking of the “tribe”, that is to say, they *essentialise* it. The logic of the “purer” society implies that their knowledge is also more basic, simple and universally true. In the Enlightenment’s philosophical novels, the “savages” are pure because of their innocence and the obedience of nature’s desires. The association of the “savage” to a child is not new and we can find this idea in Voltaire’s *Candide* or in Diderot’s work in general. The innocence and the violence seem to be part of their lives, just as it is part of nature. This colonial aesthetic of the natural society is reproduced in Nelson’s work by sentences like “It’s better to die than to live without killing” or “A close friend can become an enemy”. The sentences are radical, and only highlight the “raw” aspect of the societies. The importance of the body participates in the essentialisation of the “tribe”. We saw that the transformations in the body are shown as an aspect of strangeness, but the fact that the body is shown enable us to identify to the subject of the photograph: behind the tattoos and piercings, *there is body just as mine*. The essence of the subjects is the same for all. Whence the name “Human Community” Barthes gave to the myth: it celebrates the idea that we’re all a big family despite the differences; an “alibi for humanism” (Barthes, 1957). Finally, the portrait gives a romanticized impression of the “tribes” as a genuine life, a simple life. It is, then, a sort of paradise that must not be forgotten.

Before They Pass Away by Jimmy Nelson is a photographic project that aims to photograph the last “original tribes” before they disappear. Nelson explicitly says that he doesn’t pretend to preserve the tribes as they are, for they inevitably evolve. He merely wants to preserve their image. To do this, his speech is divided into two principal strategies: to show strangeness and the contrast of cultures, and to show that we all share a same essence. The image that Nelson project on them is that of the “other”, as a real stranger, but who is at the same time a “same”. The speech as analysed here follows the stereotype created during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much of our modern perception on the otherness and the exotic was crystallised at that time: The same representations of wildness, of nature, of purity and of strangeness and mystery seem to be used. We must be careful though: there is no one single and common idea about the other within the literature about the subject during Enlightenment. What we see is more of a condensate of several ideas: the stereotype is constructed from of a vague understanding of different points of view and philosophical debates. According to John Downing and Charles Husband (2005), the stereotype has the characteristic that it resists to the changes and modifications. Indeed, this stereotype of the savage seems to have been modified very little. What about globalisation? And the socio-cultural shifts of the twentieth century? Haven’t they changed stereotypes on a Historical perspective? Has the modern image of non-western, smaller societies changed from the eighteenth century’s representations? Downing and Husband (2005) explain that stereotypes might be a basic cognitive way of perceive and understand the world. Primitivism and alienation seem to continue to be our

prism to understand the exterior. And when we give a speech on the other, it may be a reflection of our own perception: talking about the other is talking about oneself (Rouanet, 2001).

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