ICON, CONQUEST, TRANSNATIONALISM: 
THE VISUAL POLITICS OF CONSTRUCTING 
DIFFERENCE IN THE AMERICAS

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This study constitutes part of a broader effort to assess the politics of visual representation and its relation to discourse within the context of modernity. It investigates the relation between colonial discourse associated with early iconography of the Americas and contemporary forms of representing indigenous people and mestizos (hybrid ethnicity) in U.S. news photography and television advertising. These sites of representation are integral to the way colonial and neocolonial relations have historically been understood, reproduced, and transformed. This has involved a set of assumptions, methods, procedures, and institutions which have “produced” non-Europeans in seemingly disconnected areas of thought and practice: literature, social organization, medicine, social science, international relations, mass media, tourism, education, and so forth.

The images discussed here were chosen because they manifest recurrent features of colonial and Eurocentric discourse. The mass media have been instrumental in perpetuating notions of difference which, in another era, explicitly informed and legitimized the colonial enterprise. Eurocentric derivations of colonial discourse obfuscate the global nature of production and consumption under the aegis of transnational corporations, and contribute to the construction of cultural identities. The analysis moves beyond the critique of positive or negative images of the Other, with its implicit reference to an unmediated social reality beyond the text, and assumes that texts refract and constitute a social environment already mediated by discourse. Following Bakhtin, visual communication and its related aural and written codes may be understood as the condensation of discourses generated by the interactions of socially and historically situated subjects. Colonial and Eurocentric discourses refract and constitute discourses generated by social interactions within and between Amerindians, mestizos, and Europeans. This may be discerned at the level of the text itself, as genre conventions assemble competing discourses which inform cultural identities as well as strategies of dominance, negotiation, and resistance beyond the text.
The conquest of America initiated the global transformations which have defined political, economic, and cultural relations between the center and the periphery of the world capitalist system (Amin; Wallerstein, Capitalist and “Culture”; Todorov). It coincided with the development of print and graphic technologies during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which transformed modes of communication and consciousness. This contributed to the standardization of new visual codes, such as linear perspective, as well as the creation of conventions for combining text and illustrations (Lopez-Baralt Iconografia; Todorov). Together with emerging narrative codes in writing, linear perspective perpetuated the panoptic gaze of the privileged/centered subject, the priority given to sight among all the senses, and the ordering of space and time in ways which often deny the coevalness of the Other (Fabian; Corbey 361–363; Todorov 121–23). The Other could be codified, largely in the form of a monologue (Zavala), and displaced across space and time to meet the demands of the colonial enterprise and to contain resistance to the European civilized mission.

Central to this cultural practice is what Fabian refers to as “the ideological effects of visualism as a cognitive style” (Corbey 361). Corbey (361) notes that “what is seen, the objectified Other, is looked on as coming from far away places, but also, and more importantly, from a different, allochronic time.” As will be argued in the subsequent analysis, this visual practice has persisted in contemporary photography and video/film, which serve a similar function as did the cosmographies and illustrated travelogues of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, linear perspective and other visual codes developed in the early modern period have defined the largely Eurocentric tradition of visual representation over the past five hundred years. Contemporary mass media have inherited this tradition, which has been diffused and appropriated the world over.

It is generally acknowledged that the visual representation of Amerindians and their physical environment during the early colonial period stressed the dichotomy between “noble savages” and “barbarians.” Bhabha refers to this as the fetishistic quality of colonial discourse, in which the Other is simultaneously recognized/desired and disavowed. It is through the binarisms informed by this sort of fetishism that colonial discourse perpetuated an ideology which subsumed the aggression of a productive economy (e.g., genocide, slavery, deterritorialization) within the discourse of a moral economy stressing the European civilization.

Conquest and Representation