

## ТЕОРІЯ І ІСТОРІЯ КУЛЬТУРИ

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### **THE BORDERS OF EMPIRE AND THE “ORIENTAL OTHER”: THE FAR EAST AND MANCHURIA IN THE EARLY RUSSIAN PHOTOGRAPHY**

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*The topicality of the paper is stipulated by the fact that it is devoted to the little-studied subject – semantics of the visual images of the Oriental Other in the Russian public consciousness of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. The study was carried out on the material of the early photographs of the late 19th century in which images of the eastern borders of the Russian Empire – the Far East and Manchuria, as well as the Chinese-Eastern Rail Road (KVGD) – were reflected. The author argues that the construction of the KVGR should demonstrate the technological progress and the spiritual strength of the empire in the Russian mass consciousness. The study is based on the post-colonial and gender methodologies, and also cultural criticism.*

*Keywords: early photography, empire, Oriental Other, Chinese-Eastern Rail Road (KVGD)*

**В.А. Суковата**

### **КОРДОНИ ІМПЕРІЇ І «СХІДНИЙ ІНШИЙ»: ДАЛЕКИЙ СХІД І МАНЬЧЖУРІЯ В РАННІЙ РОСІЙСЬКІЙ ФОТОГРАФІЇ.**

*Актуальність статті обумовлена тим, що вона присвячена дослідженню теми, яка лежить на перетині візуальних та орієнталістських студій і мало досліджена в сучасній українській філософії – семантиці візуальних образів східного Іншого в російській суспільній свідомості кінця 19 – початку 20 століття. Дослідження виконано на матеріалі фотографії кінця 19 століття, в якій зафіксовані образи найбільш віддалених окраїн Російської імперії – Далекого Сходу і Маньчжурії, а також Китайсько-Східної Залізної Дороги. КСЗД, на думку автора, повинна була в російській масовій свідомості демонструвати технологічний прогрес і силу духу імперії. У дослідженні використана постколоніальна і гендерна методології, а також культурна критика.*

*Ключові слова: рання фотографія, імперія, східний Інший, Китайсько-Східна Залізна Дорога*

**В.А. Суковатая**

### **ГРАНИЦЫ ИМПЕРИИ И «ВОСТОЧНЫЙ ДРУГОЙ»: ДАЛЬНИЙ ВОСТОК И МАНЧЖУРИЯ В РАННЕЙ РОССИЙСКОЙ ФОТОГРАФИИ.**

*Актуальность статьи обусловлена тем, что она посвящена исследованию малоизученной темы, которая лежит на пересечении визуальных и ориенталистских студий – семантике визуальных образов восточного Другого в российском общественном сознании конца 19 – начала 20 века. Исследование проделано на материале ранней фотографии конца 19*

века, в которой зафиксированы образы самых восточных окраин Российской империи – Дальнего Востока и Манчжурии, а также Китайско-Восточной Железной Дороги (КВЖД). Строительство КВЖД, по мнению автора, должно было в российском массовом сознании демонстрировать технологический прогресс и силу духа империи. В исследовании использована постколониальная и гендерная методологии, и также культурная критика.

*Ключевые слова:* ранняя фотография, империя, восточный Другой, Китайско-Восточная Железная Дорога

The empire is one of the key concepts of the 19th century consciousness and the contemporary Cultural studies. The images of the empire were reflected in the majority of artistic works – in literature [10], painting [11], and in photography [13] which was a new kind of art in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. The leading European empires of the 19th century were Great Britain, France, and the Russian Kingdom which struggled for their dominance in politics, economic, and culture, and for widening their borders, as well. As the famous theorists of post-colonialism and nationalism (Eduard Said [14], Homi Bhabha [1], Benedict Anderson [9], and others) insisted, that the empire, race, and nation are “artificial constructions”, where one of the goals is to make the positive image of “self” (nation or empire), and the negative image of the “others”. The Other is one of the central figures in forming the empire, the nation or the European image of the “Orient” where the Orient has not a geographical (the East) meaning but symbolical sense (cultural and political opposition towards Christian white Europe).

The Orientalism ideology, according to E. Said, was formed in the 19th century as a romantic image of the mysterious, exotic and rich lands which was presented as the racial and cultural Other for Europe. E. Said argued that the creation of the image of the exotic or hostile “Orient” was an effective tool of the “imperial” European consciousness to confirm its own positive identification and to mark the symbolic borders of the European “normative culture”. The most powerful instruments in the construction of “imperial” consciousness were the European Romanticism literature and the Oriental painting of the 19th century: the “Oriental plots” and the exotic images became an essential source in the formation of self-consciousness of the European empires in the 19th century. Many scientists of the 19th century searched approval for race hierarchies in biology, medicine, anthropology and other natural sciences [5]. The Orient was often represented in the Western European painting as a selection of the exotic “boundary effects”, such as: the “harem” as a metaphor for sexual subordination of women, the “bazaar” as a metaphor for economical backwardness and “opium dens” as a metaphor of the moral deviancy [7]. The Oriental plots in the European artists’ works visualized the phenomena which were the most strange for the Western Christian culture: the images of the Orient masculinity were personified in the European visual mentality in the images of the Turkish scimitars, or Arabian racing horses, or hunting tigers or lions, and the Orient femininity was imagined in Oriental harems and beautiful odalisques who played a leading role in exoticization and erotization of the East (as it was presented in the Western European painting of the 19th century, in works by E. Delacroix, J.-L. Jerome, T. Williamson, and others [12]). The similar situation existed in the European photography of the Orient of the 19th century: the people in those photos were the signs of exotics at same extent as Oriental temples and tombs, Eastern bazaars and exotic animals [3]. And although photography became an independent art form in the 20th century, early photos followed the artistic canons and ideological traditions of the 19th century.

The goal of my paper is to analyze how the Russian empire constructed its own borders in its own cultural self-consciousness and to visualize them. I develop my ideas on the materials of the early Russian photos of the Far East and Manchuria which were the most distant Eastern borders of the Russian empire. The first photo pictures of the Far East and Manchuria were made during the construction of the KVGД – the Chinese Eastern Rail Road

which was of a significant political and cultural importance in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries as a connection between European territories of the Russian empire and Manchuria and the Amur River. I want to determine what place took KVGД in Russian imperial consciousness, in the frames of the Orientalism ideology and how it was reflected in the earlier Russian photographs: was there a difference in the perception and visual constructions of the Oriental Other in Western Europe and in Russia?

The whole 19th century was the time of the active expansion of the Russian empire to the East, and not only to Central Asia, but to the Far East and the Amur Region, as well. The cultural evidence of the Russian expansion and the new Russian imperial borders were reflected in the paintings, diaries and literature. Russia as the empire has begun to “collect” the Eastern lands since the 15th century: the movement of Muscovy Kingdom to the Urals, Siberia, Central Asia and the Far East began in the time of Ivan the Terrible. The joined territories of Central Asia and Siberia had already been inhabited by the ethnic Russians and other Slavic people, and there were many mixed marriages between the Slavic people and the ethnic Siberian tribes, and the integration of those parts in the Russian empire became comparatively peaceful and painless.

The specificity of the Russian progress to the Far East in the 19th century was in fact that many enthusiasts from the different circles of the Russian intelligentsia participated actively in that reclaiming: mining engineers and geologists, school teachers and university professors, officers of the Army and Navy, doctors and political exiles were among the first investigators. Many of them had not only military, political and economic interests, but also research and cultural ones. Scientific management missions were carried out by the Russian Geographical Society. Siberian merchants and industrialists were interested in the studies of the natural resources of the Far East and Amur Region, and they gave the logistical and financial support of those expeditions. So, it can be noted that the Russian movement to Siberia and the Far East was considered in the Russian public consciousness of the 19th century as a type of the territorial extension of the empire which was not a “capture” or “conquest” of the others (the “eastern” people), but something like “joining” stateless lands and ungoverned tribes. Does it mean that the Far East and Manchuria did not play the role of the “Oriental Other” in the Russian cultural consciousness? According to the Canadian scholar M. Shkandriy [8], Ukraine and the Caucasus played the role of the metaphorical Orient in the Russian national consciousness for a long time: for example, the Crimea was ethnically and culturally linked with the Turks, the Tatars, the Greeks who were culturally “Others” (“foreign”) in the mentality of the Russian Empire. But the Siberian, North and Far East people of Russia (the Evenks, the Chukches, the Buryats, the Saami population) were not considered as the “totally foreign” in Russian empire, they were considered to be the “habitable outskirts”, indigenous inhabitants of the Russian empire [4].

The founders of the Russian Orientalism were largely determined by Vasyliy Vereshchagin’s painting, one of the most famous Russian orientalists of the 19th century [6]. However, Vereshchagin’s poetics of the Orient differed from the Western European Orientalism by E. Delacroix and J.-L. Jerome: Vereshchagin did not personify humanity only with a certain national or cultural group, with the European West or the exotic East; Vereshchagin critically depicted both the cruelty of the British Army in India, and the Russian Army in Central Asia. Unlike the Western European Orientalism, Vereshchagin tried to describe the East not as the “exotic” place but as the independent culture with its own spirituality and ethics. He made a lot of ethnographic sketches of the different Asian ethnic groups, and the traditional oriental sacred buildings which evidenced the spiritual life of the Eastern people. The same – ethnographic and spiritual – approach towards the Eastern peoples and their life can be learnt in the early photographs of the Russian Far East [15]. We find many similarities between the Russian Oriental painting (in Vereshchagin’s style) and the early photos of the Russian Far East and the Amur Region which had a goal to portray the life

in the Russian Far East in the naturalistic style. Studying the early Russian photos of Russian Far East, I believe that one of the semiotic ideas of the early photos of the Russian Far East and the Amur Region was to emphasize that the Russian life is similar everywhere, for all the citizens and in all the parts of the Russian empire, and in spite of the distance from the center of the empire, the Russian locals in the Amur Region lived in the same manner as the Russian peasants in the central Russian provinces. I suppose that the Far East and the Amur Regions were not understood in Russia as the “exotic” and “hostile” Orient and as something “alien”, unpredictable and hostile to the traditional culture of the Russian empire. According to the concept of Benedict Anderson [9], a *map, census of population, and a museum* played a very important role in the construction of empires: a map of a country is the political symbol of the “body” of the nation and empire; census of population asserts the existence of the nation as *physical bodies of an empire* (or a nation); the purpose of a museum is to represent the history of a nation or empire in visible artifacts, to approve the ontological right of an empire (or a nation) to exist in a memory of generations. That is why the photos of the distant part of the empire played not only geographical and cognitive functions but also political ones in the imperial struggle for the dominance.

The last part of the 19th century was the time of the active development of photography, and the first photographers, beginning with Maxim Dmitriev and Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky, used the photography to fix in photos the everyday life of different ethnic groups and professions in the Russian Empire, as well as the images of nature and the cities of the huge empire. For example, Dmitriev was the creator of the famous photographs the “Volga Collection” with the unique images of the cities and the nature of the Volga River from its sources to its mouth (1894-1903). S. Prokudin-Gorsky became famous as the author of the first large photo trip around the Russian Empire (1905) during which he took about 400 color photographs of the Caucasus, the Crimea and Ukraine; in 1907, Prokudin-Gorsky made color photographs of Samarkand and Bukhara. Prokudin-Gorsky conceived the project: to capture in modern Russia's photographs, its culture, history and modernization, and in 1911, Prokudin-Gorsky twice performed photo expeditions to Turkestan, filmed monuments in the Yaroslavl and Vladimir provinces [2]. In 2001 the Library of Congress in the USA opened the exhibition “The Empire, which was Russia” for which 122 color photos images were selected from Prokudin-Gorsky’s collection.

Since the development of photography, the images of the Far East and the Amur Region occupied the significant place in the early Russian photos of the empire. The first photo images of the powerful nature of the Amur Region and the Far East were amazing for the inhabitants of Central Russia and they played the role of the visual evidence of the vastness of the Russian empire. Many of the early photos of the Far East belong to the genre of landscape and they depicted the forests, rivers, volcanoes and hills which were presented as a background for the geographic or military expeditions there. On the one hand, the photos of the Far East nature were seen as very exotic for the Russians of the central parts of the empire. On the other hand, the photos of the Far East inserted the images of the Far East nature as Russia’s “own land” in the Russian mass culture. The early Russian photos of the Far East and the Amur Region created the image of “our great and powerful country” in the Russian public mentality, and those photos created the public reasons for the national pride. That is why I consider the photos of the KVGД to be the construction of the Russian cultural mythology and the project of the “new empire image”.

The idea of the KVGД seems to be the extremely romantic image and quite in keeping with the optimistic philosophies of the 19th century: the KVGД was imagined as a part of the Great Trans-Siberian Way to establish a direct rail link between the Western European countries and the countries of Eastern Asia (between Russia and China). The idea of the KVGД to connect the two continents, – Asia and Europe, and the different nations and countries (Russia and China) was consistent with the spirit of the 19th century belief in the

possibility of the universal progress, the transatlantic traffic and the universalization of the social and human values. I deem that the poetics of the KVGД and the photos of trains in them was close to the poetics of the famous European train which was named the "Orient Express", and which has joined Istanbul (Asia) with the capital towns of several European countries (London, Paris, Milan, Belgrade, Sofia, Bucharest) since 1883. The transcontinental train was a symbol not only fast and transcontinental travelling, but also "comfortable travelling", that train as if created the special space-time of "luxury". The "luxury travel" as if erased the mythological contrast between the "civilized Europe" and the "wild Asia". The dominance of the railway stations in the photos devoted to the KVGД should demonstrate the human victory over the severe climate and nature that gave to observers the labor optimism and the pathos of negotiation. So, the aesthetics of the KVGД included the pathos of the transformation of nature, scientific and technological optimism, belief in social justice.

To sum up, I can give several conclusions: the Russian Far East, despite its geographical position in the geographical east of the Russian Empire, was never performed a symbolic "Other", "Orient" or the symbol of the "eastern colonies" in the Russian imperial consciousness in the 19-20<sup>th</sup> centuries; the principles of visual representations of the Russian Far East were different from the Oriental paradigms of the Western painting and photography; the photos of the KVGД had a inner meaning which supported the idea of the powerful and multinational Russian Empire, which moved to progress, both technical and social. The progress was proved by capability of the Russian people to overcome any difficulties and to unite different nations people to achieve great goals.

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