

Igoe, Jim. *The nature of spectacle: On images, money, and conservation capitalism*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press. 2017. Pp. 161. Softcover. ISBN 9780816530441. \$29.95.

Nature of Spectacle

The Nature of Spectacle is a fascinating book that explores the relationship between conservation, images and money in today's neoliberal era. Mainly informed by Guy Debord's¹ concept of the spectacle, Anna Tsing's² notion of spectacular accumulation and Karl Marx's ideas on money and commodity fetishism, Igoe introduces us into the world of global conservation as it takes shape in Tanzania's northern safari circuit. According to Igoe, "This book, as the title suggests, is about nature spectacle, which refers most basically to a kind of nature that is heavily mediated by mass-produced and -disseminated images" (p. x). Central to the book is the argument that within the conservation world, certain types of images of nature are created to produce and represent certain realities that are disconnected from the contexts, people and the social relations that produced them. As such, these alienated images connect different spaces and agents (for example, potential donors and consumers, with conservation NGOs), creating circuits of circulation of both images and capital. Further, that these images are part of broader arrangements in which the "...control of specialised spaces is used to not only exclude people, but also to elide conflict and eschew competing imaginaries. The spaces are also often designed to facilitate orchestrated encounters that frequently take the form of commodified touristic experiences" (p. 12).

The book has six chapters apart from the introduction. The introduction presents the general theoretical notions that guide the rest of the discussion, as well as an outline of the chapters to come. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 focus on the particular case of the Tanzanian northern safari circuit. Chapter 1 presents the process by which the Serengeti is presented and sold as a space of unabated nature, at the same time that its particular history, framed by the European colonial encounter, is hidden. Particularly interesting is the way in which Igoe shows how Grzimek's portrayal of the region, in his 1959 film, *Serengeti shall not die!*, deployed a wartime style of propaganda that helped connect this place with the European public, opening it up to European tourism. This becomes central for promoting the idea that the conservation of nature and capital accumulation can come together in win-win situations, in what the author denominates as ecofunctional medium. Chapter 2 follows up on this discussion to show how the production of the Massai steppe heartland as an ecofunctional landscape overlaps with colonial geographies. The resulting image comes to render certain elements invisible (the people that were living there before the colonial encounter), while highlighting others (wildlife).

Chapter 3 focusses on the particular ways in which people's (mainly tourists) gazes and visits to the Tanzanian safari circuit are managed into predictable and controlled images and encounters. The result is a sort of seamless narrative in which conflicts, such as those between elephants and small local farmers are negated and hidden. However, Igoe reminds us, "This vision is not false or even misrepresentative. Rather, it is highly selective... Situated at intersections of tourism, conservation, and development, these spaces are crucial sites of translation through which diverse life-worlds are turned into exchangeable and circulating forms of representation" (p. 70).

In Chapter 4, the focus is moved away from the Serengeti to the wider scope of the 'neoliberalisation of conservation' and rise of a small number of environmental BINGOs (Big NGOs) that came to dominate conservation funding and global conservation agendas. Focus is on types of linkages that are created between these NGOs and the corporate sector, a partnership that would have been hard to imagine in the previous period. Chapter 5 focusses on the green consumer appeal and how spectacular images of nature combined with the powers of abstraction of technology come together to propose that the best way in which people can help save nature is through their consumption. In this way, consumption (money, really) is presented as a kind of power in which you can 'get' (goods and services), and 'give' (for example, help protect the polar bear or the jaguar) at the same time. Thus, "in a world saturated by interactive media, the swipe of a plastic card or the push of a virtual button appears to initiate a chain of events resulting in the protection of polar bears on Arctic ice floes or elephants on African savannas" (p. 96). According to the author, the problem with this way of thinking is that it operates through the simplification of very complicated processes, and where the "hyperconsumptive consumer culture" (p. 101) that drives forward capitalism nowadays is never questioned, but rather promoted. In this way, the best way to help is to consume, not to get involved; this, according to Debord, is the whole point of the spectacle.

Finally, in Chapter 6, the main point that the author makes is that "... one of the central arguments of this book, in fact, is that modernist approaches to conservation and development are not possible without fantasy and storytelling..." (p. 110). However, the mechanisms through which this storytelling and fantasy are produced can also be used to produce other forms of narratives and imagining that may help interrupt and subvert the type of images and realities that are created by the dominant conservation model and the spectacles of accumulation and nature that it creates.

In general, *The Nature of Spectacle*, is a very suggestive book. One that leaves you with a lot of questions and sharply resonates with processes in other places besides Tanzania and Africa. It is a very well-done critique of the dominant conservation model, the green consumer appeal of the ecofunctional mode and the idea that nature can be saved only through capitalism and its markets. Particularly insightful is the idea that by highlighting certain elements while rendering others invisible, capitalism is able to present itself as free of conflicts and capable of bringing about a better, healthier world. However, there are two topics that I find problematic in the text: one that has to do with the perspective from which the book is written; the other, regarding the place that conflict and resistance (or its absence) has in the text.

Regarding the first point, it is quite clear that the book is written from the perspective of an anthropologist based in the United States. Further, he is interested above all in the sort of images and constructed realities of Africa that circulate mainly in the United States and Europe, as well as at global events such as the World Conservation Congress. In contrast, very little space is given to the perspective of local Tanzanian actors who are also involved within the circuits of circulation of both images and capital that the book focusses on. For example, Igoe shows how the whole idea of the ecofunctional model is predicated on the idea that the host countries, in this case Tanzania, will benefit in terms of economic development from these sorts of conservation projects. However, very little is said as to how this is understood by the Tanzanian government and officials, and the communities involved. It is clear that the objective of the book is not to present an ethnographic account of the Serengeti and its dynamics. However, giving a bit more space to these voices would have been useful.

The idea of conflict has an ambiguous place within the book. On the one hand, the author is very adamant that the function of the spectacle is to hide and elide conflicts and contradictions that are constitutive to the relationship between the conservation of nature and capital accumulation. In many instances throughout the book, we are presented with short examples of these conflicts, as well as some attempts from different subaltern actors to resist and subvert this conservation model. However, on the other hand, we are never really shown how the spectacles of nature, that are so central to the argument of the book, are seen and understood by these subaltern actors. For example, we are told that indigenous groups are very much opposed to the conservation model set up in the Serengeti as

it translates into loss of lands and their ways of life. However, I was left wondering as to how these groups respond to this situation. Do they protest outside the park to catch the attention of tourists? What sort of relations do they enter into with BINGOs? Do they pressure the Tanzanian state to defend their interests? Do they create international alliances with other groups that have similar grievances? Could spectacular images be used by these groups to subvert or interrupt the conservation model presented by the book? These questions probably go beyond the original scope of the book, but I feel that some attention to this would have helped round up the arguments of the author.

All in all, I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the relationship between the conservation of nature and capital accumulation. I believe it would be an excellent book for teaching, as it presents a set of very complex arguments in a rather friendly manner and makes you question your own place, as a consumer of both images and commodities, within capital's approach to the production of nature.

NOTES

1. Debord, Guy. 1995. *Society of Spectacle*. New York: Zone.
2. Tsing, Anna. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University press.

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