

Francesco Paolo Campione

Looking through the Other's Eyes: Hans Georg Berger's work on Lao ceremonies

The interpretive choices of Hans Georg Berger, the reasons that made him choose the forms and sequences to which he has reduced the infinity of choices of how to depict the universe, make up part of a pathway of knowledge and initiation. Berger has metaphorically explored the pathways of Lao culture, learning to walk, on tiptoe, in a new ideological space and reflect back its essence, in the complexity of its rules and relationships. Taken together, the images made by Hans Georg Berger make up a true and real cognitive universe: if they are put next to one another they define, almost physically, the area in which he moved to acquire knowledge. From his centre of gravity made up of his willingness to understand others and their beliefs, he set off daily along different roads, to return, before sunset, within himself, internally enriched. Whenever he found obstacles to overcome, he returned, often several times, until he was able to take the next step or give up his ambition, humbly realising that he was not going to be able to carry out his plan. With time he began to feel at home with the reality of representation and began to compose the paragraphs of his ethnological treatise without words. The problem of the fruition of his work was resolved by Berger in the only way possible. He took his photographs for the monks of Luang Prabang: for the only people, in the end, capable of judging the harmony of the contents of the photographs and the congruity with which the different paragraphs made up the whole of his treatise. By doing this, Berger carried out a surprising symbolic inversion. By constantly trying to put forward in harmony the real meanings of the object and the values expressed by the observers, he clearly defined the subject, that is himself, in the role of "the Other" and in consequence consciously worked to overcome his condition of exclusion. He recognised the universality of cultures, starting out from a consideration of his own diversity, not of the diversity of others, and he made this into an opportunity for inner growth and a chance to improve the dialogue between different populations. The best proof of the validity of his assumptions is the fact that the monks of Luang Prabang keep his photographs between their few personal effects, that they use them for reflection and introspective meditation and they take spiritual advantage of what they represent.

(...)

It is exactly the capacity to not ideologically interfere in the process of building up the images, that has allowed Berger to reach a most important result: that of harmoniously connecting the beliefs of "the Other" with his own spiritual growth.

from *Town of Waters. The photographic work of Hans Georg Berger*, Edited by Francesco Paolo Campione and Anna Maria Montaldo, Aisthesis, Milan, 2001

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