

“NO PICTURES, PLEASE”

## JOSÉ LUÍS PEIXOTO’S JOURNEY TO NORTH KOREA: THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A CERTIFICATE OF PRESENCE

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### A VIAGEM DE JOSÉ LUÍS PEIXOTO À COREIA DO NORTE: A FOTOGRAFIA COMO UM CERTIFICADO DE PRESENÇA

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In 2012, the Portuguese writer José Luís Peixoto travelled to North Korea and the result of this trip was the travel account *Dentro do Segredo* [Inside the Secret]. In his travelogue, Peixoto highlights the use of photography for the verification and legitimization of a journey. Few photographs produced in North Korea have room for improvisation and the author is aware of this fact. He knows that ahead of his photographic lens there is always another lens – that of an austere political regime. The article explores the relationship between words and images in Peixoto’s travel account. It aims to demonstrate how photographs are unreliable forms of representation of the world and – whether they are taken or seen – how they complicate any attempt of a faithful narration of the Other. This study will build on the author’s point that any image captured in that space requires double decoding.

**Keywords:** North Korea. Travel writing. Photography. José Luís Peixoto. Portuguese contemporary literature.

Em 2012, o escritor português José Luís Peixoto viajou para a Coreia do Norte, uma experiência que descreveu na obra intitulada *Dentro do Segredo*. Ao longo do relato, o narrador problematiza o uso da fotografia como meio de verificação e legitimação duma viagem. Poucas fotografias produzidas na Coreia do Norte abrem espaço à improvisação e o narrador mostra-se sensível a esse facto. Ele reconhece que diante da sua lente fotográfica existe sempre uma outra lente – a de um regime político austero. O artigo explora justamente a relação entre palavras e imagens presente no relato de Peixoto. Procura demonstrar como as fotografias – sejam elas produzidas ou observadas – constituem formas falíveis de representação do mundo, dificultando eventuais

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tentativas de descrever fielmente o Outro. Este estudo partirá, assim, do ponto de vista do autor que considera que qualquer imagem capturada naquele espaço exige uma dupla decodificação.

**Palavras-chave:** Coreia do Norte. Literatura de Viagens. Fotografia. José Luís Peixoto. Literatura portuguesa contemporânea.

## 1. Introduction

José Luís Peixoto, a Portuguese writer born in 1974, is one of the most acclaimed and internationally recognised authors of his generation. His books were translated into about twenty different languages. In 2012 he travelled to North Korea, and that journey would lead to the travelogue entitled *Dentro do Segredo* [Inside the Secret], which I intend to analyse.<sup>1</sup> Within Portuguese literature, the travelogue of a journey to North Korea is unique: the spaces represented tend to be linked to the colonial past and to the overseas relations established by Portugal. However, this trend has been countered in recent years, with the emergence of travel narratives undertaken in very distinct contexts from previous historical experiences.

Few authors have actually put in writing the experience of a trip to North Korea following the precepts of a literary account.<sup>2</sup> North Korea has remained a country seldom represented in Western literature. That is certainly due to the fact that foreigners visiting North Korea have to sign on arrival “a statement in which each participant guarantee[s] that they [will] not publish any account or record of what they witnessed” (Peixoto 2012, pp. 36–37). Peixoto writes that he had to contact a lawyer later, on his return to Portugal, in order to reverse that commitment. But when describing the notes he discreetly made in his notebook throughout the journey, it seems evident that his intention from the beginning was to publish the account.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, although his published work is mostly fiction, in 2017 the author returned to travel writing, again with Asia as his destination, in a book entitled *O Caminho Imperfeito* [The Imperfect Path]. This book together with *Dentro do Segredo* are the only works he has published within this genre, although in the last year the author has also started to publish on his website brief texts about his travel experiences, always accompanied by photographs (<https://www.joseluispeixotoemviagem.com/>).

All quotations from José Luís Peixoto’s *Dentro do Segredo* (2012) are my own translations into English. The title *Inside the Secret* is the choice of the translator who translated some excerpts for the journal *Ninth Letter* (Peixoto 2014).

<sup>2</sup> For a comparative analysis of Peixoto’s work, from a literary perspective, one can consider the recent *North Korea Journal* (2019), by the English writer and comedian Michael Palin, who also travelled to the territory in May 2018, for the analogous period of two weeks. The bibliography on North Korea by Western authors is based mainly on historical, sociological, or anthropological visions of the country, with discourses tending to secularize and to establish a series of clichés and acritical conceptions into a barrens that recent works attempt to address (e.g. Armstrong 2011; Ryang 2009). However, very few texts have described the traveller’s intimate perspective, or his ethical, moral, even physical concerns in the encounter with North Korean reality.

For the author, the decision to visit that country, born from the subjective “desire to be in a place where no person had [his] appearance”, quickly takes on more concrete motivations: a certain “curiosity for closed societies and totalitarian political systems” (*idem*, p. 22). Beginning the search for possible itineraries, he comes across the offer of a tour called *Kim Il-sung 100<sup>th</sup> birthday Ultimate Mega Tour (Ultimate Option)*, which he came to choose. In April 2012, it would be Kim Il-sung's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, deceased in 1994, and “the North Korean Government would allow an extraordinarily long, *ultimate mega* visit, fifteen days long” (*idem*, p. 27). He found other options too, which required a shorter waiting time, but he saw in them the disadvantage of the connection to the State:

From what I had read about the country, I expected to have to silence my opinions often, always, but making a trip that, according to the website, “would be the only guarantee to maintain effective and successful trade with the government”, and where I would be treated as “a friend of the People’s Republic of Korea” was too much for me, not *ultimate mega*. (*idem*, pp. 27–28)

As a tourist<sup>3</sup>, the need to have some authenticity and autonomy was followed by uncertainties, anxieties, and fears typical of someone who is preparing to go *inside the secret*.

Once in North Korea, his first concern is the impossibility of making photographic records during most of the trip:

We all knew we couldn't take pictures during the trip. There was no need to ask, it had always been that way. When we were travelling, we could never take photographs. It was hard to hear the voice of the guide repeating to us dozens of times a day in a Korean accent: *No pictures, please*. (*idem*, p. 14)

Nevertheless, he takes on a staunch disobedience from the beginning: “One would have to be completely insensitive towards nostalgia so as to be able to resist it under those conditions. I did take a few photographs” (*ibidem*). In the book, however, José Luís Peixoto includes only three images: the cover photo, taken by himself, and two views of the same postcard (front and back).

Why then choose this work to reflect upon the relationship between text and image in travel narratives? First and foremost, the reflection on photography and the act of photographing imposed by the book. That reflection arises not only from the strong restrictions to photographic capture, but also from the disconcerting (and paradoxical) omnipresence of photographs that the author encounters in that territory. This refers not only to the repeated representations of the Great Leaders, but also to a whole series of scenarios set up by the government in order to produce images at the service of the regime's ideals. The fact that few photographs produced in North Korea have room for improvisation is something to which the author is particularly sensitive. Throughout the

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<sup>3</sup> Considering the narrator’s performance during the journey – someone who spends a large amount of time in self-reflection, and who tries somehow to immerse himself in the local culture, despite the many limitations –, he definitely cannot be seen as a common tourist. Peixoto fits the notion of the traveller and the explorer as well. In my study, I opted for the term ‘tourist’ because, after all, he was living a gregarious tourist experience during the trip, travelling in a group and following a fixed itinerary. But perhaps he could be more accurately defined as “a traveller among tourists”.

text, Peixoto never ceases to underline the idea that most of the photographs produced there are invoked, built, controlled, and that essentially they show people chosen by the regime, in arranged poses, with no place for spontaneity. Thus, my study will focus on the argument, developed by the author, that images do not always tell the whole story, *i.e.*, every image captured in that context requires double decoding: by reflecting on North Korean visual culture, he problematizes the very nature of representation, bringing into question the notions of original and copy, truth and simulacrum, following the idea that an image’s perceived level of influence is also based on interpretation and “believability”. Moreover, Peixoto has recently granted some of the photographs taken during his trip to the American literary magazine *Ninth Letter*, which has published them along with several excerpts of *Dentro do Segredo* translated into English with the title *Inside the Secret*. Since those photographs, at the author’s discretion, are part of the English version available online, they may also be interpreted together with the text.

## 2. The effectiveness of images

As has been noted by Peter D. Osborne and others, the presence of images or photographs attenuates the untranslatability of what a tourist encounters. An image *speaks* when the “looks between people fail to connect as if they inhabit different worlds, or share neither medium nor language to transmit them” (Osborne 2000, p. 133). However, as José Luís Peixoto has the opportunity to confirm in the moment he arrives, this is clearly not the case in North Korea, and he is confronted at all times with that fragile relationship between photography and truth to which Sontag alluded: “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. (...) Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph” (Sontag 1977/2008, p. 23).

Practically all places visited by Peixoto have photographic exhibitions – these include photographs of everyday life, showing happy North Koreans in the context of work or family. He often notices that many of these photographs published in newspapers or displayed in museums and factories (Peixoto 2012, pp. 143–146) are emptied to the point of appearing devoid of art, even suggesting the idea of a certain innocence from an ideological point of view – perhaps assuming that the apparent “neutrality” facilitates the outlook of the foreigner, conferring upon him or her the feeling of familiarity. Peixoto takes a lucid view on this refractory and partial vision that is imposed on him, aware that in front of a photographic lens there is always another lens – that of an austere political regime: “After a short time, it is very easy to realise that there is a whole simulacrum of economy only for foreign visitors” (*idem*, p. 122).

Attempts to control visualizations as representations of political and social order became instrumental for several twentieth-century dictatorships, be it Nazi Germany or the Stalinist USSR, fascist Italy, Francoist Spain, Salazarist Portugal, Communist China or Japan’s wartime military regime (*cf.* Low 2006; Plamper 2012). Under dictatorships, professional photographers’ work was (and still is) officially regulated and licensed – Heinrich Hoffmann, for example, had exclusive rights to photograph Hitler and his entourage (*cf.* Koepnick 2020). Following Peixoto’s point of view (Peixoto 2012, p. 53),

in North Korean society, similarly, art seems to have only an edifying, representative, mimetic function: it has as its end the representation of the history of the last one hundred years and its leaders, conveyed by invariably manipulated images – all the content of art is managed so that it contains in itself (and transmits) the reflection of a fictional reality.

Let us look at the representation of the house where Kim Il-sung was born:

The house is too perfect and corresponds point by point to a narrative that, for those who are not blinded by the cult, is quite inconceivable.

The image of the house is much used in the recurring iconography of the regime. I had already seen it several times: in the exhibition of flowers, on calendars in hotel rooms, on posters in the street, etc. It represents the emotional attachment of the leader to his modest roots and the consequent commitment of immortal love towards the country.

Modest home, modest family, modest instruments. At the end of the day, that was probably the adjective that the guide used most often. (Peixoto 2012, p. 138)

The biographical itinerary, the statues or the photographs of the leaders are a distorted mirror that deforms reality, but which still operate as a mirror for the masses. Recent studies sustain that the legitimacy of the North Korean state is based solely on the leaders' personal legitimacy, and is maintained by the indoctrination of people with leader symbols and the enactment of leadership cults in daily life (*cf.* Jowett & O'Donnell 1999; Lim 2015; Matherly 2019; Oh & Hassig 2000; Shneer 2011).

As I have mentioned above, photography has worked as a cultural and political medium deeply linked to the establishment and support of authoritarian political regimes. It becomes even clearer when we flip through Nicholas Bonner's collection of North Korean artefacts (photographs, postcards, posters, stamps, tickets and many other items) published in 2017 and 2019, in two books entitled *Made in North Korea: Graphics from Everyday Life in the DPRK* and *Printed in North Korea: The Art of Everyday Life in the DPRK*. Both books provide a rare insight into North Korea's state-controlled graphic output. Nicholas Bonner, who has been visiting the country since 1993, shared some considerations about the particular use of photography in North Korea, in an interview with the *British Journal of Photography*:

Photography in North Korea is not an art-form per se; it is used for recording purposes closely tied in with propaganda. Whilst they do have art competitions and shows in various mediums, I have never seen a photographic exhibition other than those used to extol the virtues of the revolution. (...) North Korean photography is not for decoration but for a strict and controlled purpose. They do use photography for levity (photography of nature, historic scenes, happy kids etc) but it is very one dimensional in aesthetic and spiritual content. (...) In North Korea everything is at least nominally run by the State and thus every image has to be passed and approved at some point by someone in some position of authority to do so. There is nothing visually shown that is not meant to be there. (Bonner *apud* Smyth 2018, 4<sup>th</sup> parr.)

The power of the visual in political communication is one of the aspects Peixoto comments on most throughout his account. Objectivity and transparency, in the light of this oppressive worldview, are nothing more than cultural discourses developed by the dangerous Western capitalism.

In the Museum of American Atrocities, in Sinchon, the author finds perhaps the most flagrant (and distressful) examples of the massive use of images (Peixoto 2012, pp. 151–154). The Museum, replete with representations of patriots martyred by American soldiers, embraces the aesthetics of violence as a rhetorical tool – the images seem to be used as the elementary subtext of a hermeneutics of destruction. The apparent transparency of the visual catastrophe is just another ornament of the discourse of danger, whose most complete paradigm is the American state. Although the author wonders about the purpose of spending several hours looking at images of dying people (*cf.* Peixoto 2012, p. 154), the usefulness of this type of exhibition is not new. Isabel Capeloa Gil, when commenting on some of the ideas proposed by Ernst Jünger with regard to war photographs, notes that after viewing images of risk and lethal danger, the observer develops a double consciousness and a cold and brutal gaze, essential to the elementary affirmation of society and the annihilation of empathy (Gil 2011, p. 155).

More disturbing, however, seems to be the massive presence of the portraits of the Great Leaders: “on the chest of men and women, the emblem with the face of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, or both” (Peixoto 2012, p. 52); “couples of bridegrooms posing for photographs with the statues of the leaders” (*idem*, p. 56). They will go as far as to detail how to fold the newspaper, diligently, so as not to fold the photograph of the leader on the cover, because “that had already caused problems in the past” (*idem*, p. 36). One of the commonly accepted explanations for the human desire of being represented, a gesture that is transversal to all totalitarian leaders in History, is related to the very awareness of death: that each individual is a finite being, susceptible to disappearance and oblivion by others (Medeiros 2000, p. 36). The representation of the Great Leaders will respond, first of all, to that human need to mark a presence in the world, but also to a desire to recreate or restore it. For the foreign visitor, however, that presence gradually becomes excessive and intolerable:

After days like that, when I arrived at the hotel room, after closing the door, I could not hear about \_\_\_\_\_ one more time or his son \_\_\_\_\_. I would spend the whole day listening to the absolutely incredible deeds that \_\_\_\_\_ carried out in the most disparate activities. (...) His son \_\_\_\_\_ also had his share of unbelievable deeds. His grandson \_\_\_\_\_ was also beginning to have some record. But although they wouldn't admit it in these words, no one was comparable to \_\_\_\_\_. It was no accident that he was still president after being dead, an eternal president. I just didn't have the nerves to hear his name anymore. Neither his nor his offspring's. In those hours even the word «leader» made me slightly nauseous. (Peixoto 2012, pp. 130–131)

It does not seem unreasonable to interpret the deliberate omission of the names of the leaders as a counter-response by the narrator to the excessive way in which he is being exposed to their images. The empty spaces act as points of balance – by clipping the discourse, they can be read as a form of resistance, through irony, to the omnipresent personality cult, and as an opportunity for abstraction, silence and emptying of the senses, in counterpoint to the excessive consumption of visual information that characterises Peixoto's days.

Furthermore, the utilitarian and circumscribed functioning of art greatly complexifies the process of ascertaining and interpreting “truth”. Nonetheless, as Osborne

states, “whether or not photographs produce truths is dependent on the kind of contracts we negotiate or renegotiate with them” (Osborne 2000, p. 195). It is based on his conscience, on his beliefs and on previous readings that the tourist discerns what is legitimate, genuine and real. Although Peixoto does not do so through photographs – which he declares to be always laconic, always manipulated – he does so through writing, through explicit denunciation:

When you hide so much, you stimulate the imagination to the same extent. The brain proposes hypotheses for questions that are not answered. That is the nature of the brain. (...)

I often felt that I was left with the role of a hallucinating witness, trying to distinguish real reality from rhetorical reality only through instinct.

It was no accident that I chose to reread *Don Quijote* in North Korea.

Like him, all I have to do is be faithful to the truth that I know and believe in. In life, maybe it's always like that. Sincerity saves us before ourselves. (Peixoto 2012, pp. 62–63)

This position by the author is again in line with Sontag's words: “Socially concerned writers have not taken to cameras, but they are often enlisted, or volunteer, to spell out the truth to which photographs testify (...). In fact, words do speak louder than pictures” (Sontag 1977/2008, pp. 107–108). It is the power of the word in struggle with the power of vision, as if Peixoto were continually saying to himself and to the reader: *do not believe what you see, believe what the text allows you to see*. Although we know that texts also correspond to a construction, to a fabricated truth.

Travel writing is no exception in this regard: “In travel writing, views and gazes express a narrative space from which narrator and reader scrutinise, judge and categorise the varied cultures and societies they explore through writing and reading” (Alù & Hill 2018, p. 1). Peixoto himself admits this: “Travelling entails interpretation. Two people go to the same country and, when they return, describe the natives of that country in different ways” (Peixoto 2012, p. 61).

The tourist usually struggles with the excess of reality: where to get the tools that will help him understand the whole *truth* that is being experienced at that moment? “As tourists, we seek authenticity, an object, a truth somehow precedent to all representation”, Osborne says (2000, p. 72). In this account, the reverse is the case: aware that the identity of those people and those places is conveyed by forged images and practices, the author soon shows his readers that if there are tools with which he will provide himself, those will undoubtedly be caution and an ability to distrust everything he sees. The feeling he gives us is that he is always being ‘officially’ deceived.

### 3. Seeking authenticity

Bringing photography closer to the idea of truth, it may be useful to review now that other equally vast concept, *authenticity*, much probed by the Sociology of Tourism, but no less crucial in Travel Writing Studies. It seems to be a consensus that the genesis of tourism travel is a search for authenticity (MacCannell 1973, 1999), which can be understood as the modern version of a spiritual search. John Urry exposes the idea in the following terms: “The tourist is a kind of contemporary pilgrim, seeking authenticity in other ‘times’

and other ‘places’ away from that person’s everyday life. Tourists show particular fascination in the ‘real lives’ of others that somehow possess a reality hard to discover in their own experiences” (Urry 2002, p. 9). Authenticity thus became one of the most significant markers of the concept of travel, as an experience that implies a direct contact with the place, a personal contact, without mediation, that makes the tourists recognise that they are in communion with the whole, providing them with an important feeling of co-presence: to be there oneself, to see “for oneself”, touching, hearing, smelling, tasting, experiencing the places directly (*idem*, p. 154). Photography therefore plays a key role as an object capable of reproducing that same authenticity:

Photography *seems* to be a means of transcribing reality. The images produced appear to be not statements about the world but pieces of it, or even miniature slices of reality. A photograph thus seems to furnish evidence that something did indeed happen – that someone really was there or that the mountain actually was that large. It is thought that the camera does not lie. (*idem*, p. 127; italics by the author)

In the words of Peter D. Osborne (2000, p. 79), tourist photography is more a process of confirmation than of discovery. The particularity of North Korean tourism, according to Peixoto, lies in the fact that the impulse to consume places and photographable experiences is (like everything there, in fact) directed by the State itself. Thus, taking pictures of a particular landscape or scene does not stem from an individual intention – the whole itinerary is set up for a directed photographic capture, or even, in some places, a practically imposed one. There, more than in any other place, Osborne’s idea that “[t]ourists and their sights exist in order to be photographed; indeed are photographed in order to attain their existence” (*idem*, p. 72) seems to be true.

This trivialisation of the photographic record, taken by automatism, is certainly one of the aspects that will make the writer strive for his words to reach where the photographs do not, showing what is beyond a merely staged reality. In a hostile environment, with a narrow margin for transgression, to follow the procedures of his own conscience is his way of breaking with the conventional and of turning the journey into an experience as autonomous as possible. This is notorious in countless passages, but first of all in the fact that, against all recommendations, he is writing the account (as mentioned before, Peixoto explains that he is discreetly taking some notes in his notebook, certainly with the intention of composing that account upon his return).

The morning run beyond the established boundaries for hotel guests, the “sneaky” entrance to the Yanggakdo Football Stadium (*idem*, pp. 81–82), or the brief moments in which he manages to move away from the group, are all good examples of the attraction those spaces hold, which Dean MacCannell designates as “back region”:

Just having a back region generates the belief that there is something more than meets the eye; even where no secrets are actually kept, back regions are still the places where it is popularly believed the secrets are. (...) An unexplored aspect of back regions is how their mere existence, and the possibility of violation, functions to sustain the common sense polarity of social life into what is taken to be intimate and “real” and what is thought to be “show”. (MacCannell 1973, p. 591)



The existence of these “social backstages”, the possibility of being able to penetrate them for brief moments, are undoubtedly aspects that renew the author's enthusiasm, especially at times when the spirit seems already overcome by complete indifference. The more *inside the secret* he manages to get, the better the journey (and the account of it) will be.

MacCannell's thesis around what he calls “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1999, pp. 91–107) becomes even more appropriate to the context of this travelogue when we consider the only moment in which Peixoto claims to experience a feeling of belonging. That brief moment, in which the guides allow the group to disperse so as to watch the fireworks, is described by the author as follows:

I ran alone towards the Taedong River. There were thousands and thousands of people on its banks. Through the black opaque, I walked among them. (...) But there, next to me, in total darkness, no one would lower their voice or their gaze when they saw me, my presence was not felt. During those minutes, I was North Korean. There were even people addressing me, saying something to me, without expecting an answer. This, which seems minimal, was everything to me, filled me. That was the most intense moment I ever experienced in North Korea. (Peixoto 2012, pp. 227–228)

In fact, we can apply the concept of “staged authenticity” not only to the way the narrator interprets the places and scenes set up by the regime, but also to the fact that he feels compelled to collaborate with the staging, to follow programmed gestures mechanically, always being aware that he is only one piece in a previously staged scheme. This is noticed both when visiting some spaces (“The guides had taken us there to deceive us, drawing us into their little game of make-believe”, *idem*, p. 125), and in the collective veneration in which he has to participate: “Well behaved, we were in the first row (...). So, all at the same time as if leaping into the void, we took a long bow” (*idem*, p. 54).

On the scene by the Taedong River, on the contrary, the persistent distance between *me* and *them* (the North Koreans) seems to dissipate for the first time. Peixoto's words clearly meet the ideas proposed by MacCannell: “Being ‘one of them’, or at one with ‘them’, means, in part, being permitted to share back regions with ‘them’. This sharing allows one to see behind the others’ mere performances, to perceive and accept the others for what they really are” (MacCannell 1973, p. 592). Among the different tours organised by Chinese travel agencies to which Peixoto has access, he chooses the one that makes it possible to go through places which are generally forbidden to foreigners. This corroborates what MacCannell tells us about the complex relationship between the touristic and the authentic: “A common reason for taking guided tours of social establishments is that the tour organizes access to areas of the establishment that are ordinarily closed to outsiders” (*idem*, p. 595).

The way in which the author will, throughout the trip, relate to the photographs (either as someone producing them or as a viewer) is obviously conditioned by this context. Although photographs serve the purpose of documenting the experience, their authenticity is questioned. Therefore, the omissions, absences and the short sight of this photographic mirror are made clear at all times, which then the written text seeks to compensate.

#### 4. The photograph as a certificate of presence

Peixoto assumes the attitude of a transgressor of the rules right from the start. Photography, like writing, is an instrument that the tourist, incredulous of what he witnesses, may use to reinforce and clarify his memories. In this sense, the photographs published more recently in the American magazine *Ninth Letter* (Peixoto 2014), together with the English translation of a small part of the book, *respond*, to some extent, to certain passages that are narrated to us in the Portuguese edition.

In the publication made available by the magazine, we are led to notice the correlations between text and images. Among the photographs published, we can find the Yanggakdo Hotel and the lobby where the public telephones are located (Peixoto 2012, pp. 75–76); North Koreans lined up “in their best clothes”, fixing “a solemn expression” (*idem*, p. 71), posing for tourists; the Pyongyang metro (*idem*, pp. 87–88); the Juche Tower (*idem*, pp. 128–129); the Taedong River; young students in uniforms; the representations of the Great Leaders and some monuments of the capital – in short, a significant part of what is reported. This selection is also true to what the narrator tells us about the dualistic way in which the regime deals with tourist photography: sometimes compelling visitors to capture staged scenes, sometimes prohibiting capture in areas not prepared for this purpose – which explains, for example, the absence of representative photographs of rural areas, which are considerably poorer and where the use of cameras is completely forbidden (*idem*, p. 112).

Even if the photographs constitute external elements, as they are not included in the book, they are the ones which offer us “indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out” (Sontag 1977/2008, p. 9). As in other travel accounts, this type of photographs could be tools through which the author would try to balance his limited experience in that isolated and unknown territory; transforming the difficult, the strange, and even the hostile, into a cultural confrontation more easily digestible. But since the production of touristic photographs was, as I have already mentioned, highly staged, these images only make the stereotypes built by the regime persist in relation to the North Koreans, who should be seen by foreigners as happy people, good-looking, and well integrated in their society:

When I came down again, believing it was time to leave, Miss Kim insisted I take a picture among children dressed in satin folklore clothes. Everyone else had already done it. The children looked at me carelessly. Like me, they too knew there was no point in refusing. With my camera, Miss Kim took more than one picture of us. A woman, perhaps a teacher or trainer, took the children's arms and put them around me. She'd push the kids on me. (Peixoto 2012, p. 219)

The photograph, as a confirmation of what the author witnesses, is irreparably compromised. When José Luís Peixoto stands in front of the camera, he is aware of his role as an actor in a previously staged scene, in which previously instructed North Koreans offer themselves to his gaze. Few images produced there will have room for

improvisation or spontaneity. The appearances of each photograph will always need to be decoded.

As I have already stated, although the writer might be interested in including photographs as more transparent mirrors of reality, reality itself makes authenticity impossible. Nevertheless, this does not diminishes the interest of the photographs shared by Peixoto. Although this may not have been the goal of the publication of the photographs taken by Peixoto throughout the trip, the fact is that they confer credibility to the account. Consciously or unconsciously, the diffusion of these images continues to match a symbolic use of photography for the verification and legitimisation of the trip. It reinforces the mimetic discourse inherent to the narrative, thanks to its effect of reality, which identifies the image with its referent.

“Every photograph is a certificate of presence”, affirms Roland Barthes (1980/2000, p. 87). In line with this statement, the photographs published in the American magazine *Ninth Letter* also underline the preponderance of the use of photography for the certification of the journey. Approaching the figure of the tourist described by Peter D. Osborne, Peixoto “establishes himself as in-between, as mediator, interpreter or translator – as one who can transform the mute phenomena of the photograph into *figures* that articulate the sifting complexities” (Osborne 2000, p. 139; italics by the author) of the North Korean condition. He “acts as a friendly guide to an unfamiliar region” (*idem*, p. 138).

Not knowing the language, the images (especially photographic ones) inform and convey the message. However, in North Korea, the reception of this message is tense, since it is always filtered by the regime (*vd.* Bonner *apud* Smyth 2018). That becomes clear to the author as soon as he leafs through the newspapers delivered to passengers on the flight to Pyongyang:

It contained mainly photographs of ideal situations in a hypothetical world: on the cover, four labourers in a textile factory are working, very amused, as if one had told a joke; inside, seven scientists in a laboratory, each conducting a different experiment; then, a room full of very attentive students looking at a television set, giving the impression that the teacher was giving the class remotely, high technology; on a different page, four health professionals, doctors or nurses, surrounding a bed, where the patient was in such a perfect position that he looked dead. All the images with this level of artificiality: people with great hairstyles, impeccable clothes, perfect, like mannequins in a shop window. (Peixoto 2012, pp. 41–42)

The difficulty to recognise authenticity in what the eyes see implies a much higher difficulty to recognise that authenticity in a photographic print. This notion will gain strength throughout the journey as the writer encounters the images displayed in museums and factories:

(...) among the several more or less interesting pieces, the one that attracted me most was a photograph: in front of a table, four workers, in overalls and helmets, with protective glasses raised, as if they had taken a break, were served by four women dressed as cooks, who gave them fruit and cups of a yellowish drink, probably cider. At the centre of the table was a basket with a bunch of pears and apples; on the sides, there was an open watermelon and bottles of that same yellow drink. Everyone was laughing and the women

delivered the fruit and the drink with both hands. Behind, in the background, one of the furnaces was in full operation, incandescent.  
Surrealism. (*idem*, p. 143)

In the meantime, during the visit, Peixoto would have the opportunity to superimpose the harsh reality experienced by the workers with the image that had been shown to him: "It was well noticeable in the faces of those men, suffering under yellow helmets. When they walked away, catching their breath, there was no one waiting to give them watermelon" (*idem*, p. 145).

Sontag (1977/2008, p. 6) drew attention to that "shady commerce between art and truth", despite the presumption of authenticity attributed to photography. The greater the political involvement implied in its production, the more active the duel between "beautification" and "truth-telling" (*idem*, p. 86). Also Barthes (1980/2000, p. 87) would not be unaware of these arguments: photography can also be laborious when it cheats. Although it cannot lie about the existence of something, "it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature *tendentious*" (*ibidem*; italics by the author).

The statements of the two thinkers are, however, three decades away from Peixoto's journey. In that time, enormous technological changes were interposed, with the advent of digital photography and the widespread use of image editing programs, establishing the period that William J. Mitchell called "the post-photographic era" (Mitchell 1992, p. 239), an era that is characterized, precisely, by "the loss of photography's 'truth effect'" (Batchen 2001, p. 109), and that has led some authors (*e.g.* Neier & Pedri 2019) to intensify the debate around the application of the concept of *post-truth*. In contrast to traditional photography, the digital image can now be copied and processed in a lossless way compared to the original's quality. This fact imposes an even greater relativization of the concepts of authenticity and rigor as intrinsic characteristics of the photographic image. Deconstructing "the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure", the effectiveness of the image in the production of "reliable evidence" becomes disputable. The principle of uncertainty is then what reigns. In Peixoto's travelogue, everything is called into question at every moment, until the sense of disbelief is complete: "I stopped asking questions. I listened passively. I also paid little attention to the answers that were given to me. I had stopped believing" (Peixoto 2012, p. 159).

## 5. The symbolic meaning of a postcard

Before concluding, I would like to reflect on the only images (besides the cover photograph) which make up the original edition of the work: the front and back of a postcard (Peixoto 2012, pp. 198–199). The front of the postcard corresponds to a photograph of the Children's Palace, which Peixoto would visit during his last days in Pyongyang (see Figure 1); on the back, we find a message handwritten by the author, with his name and address filling in the recipient's space (see Figure 2). The message reads: "So that when you are no longer here and are another, you may receive these words and, with them, a little of being here and being their meaning" (*idem*, p. 198).



Figure 1. Front of the postcard.

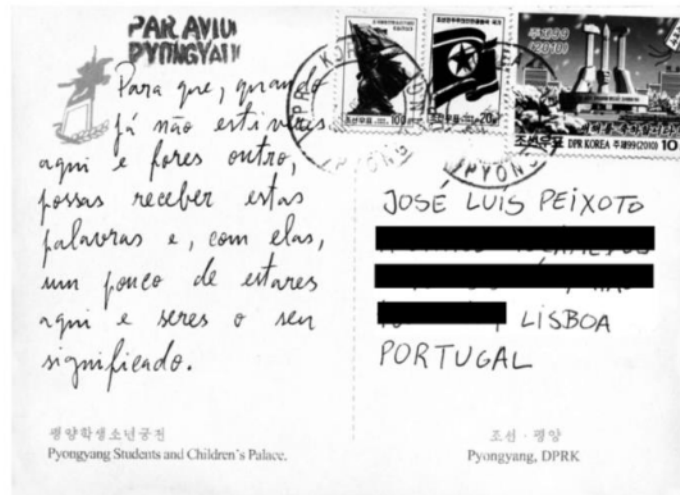


Figure 2. Back of the postcard.

A postcard is an object used to send simple, not very detailed, greetings, not least because the text written on it will not be private. Although the author is aware that his choice of writing a postcard and sending it to his Portuguese address may be watched and controlled, he explains in his own words the motivations for that symbolic gesture:

Those were literal words which, at that very moment, had a rather sentimental meaning. I was living their meaning.

At the same time, I was amused to imagine what the controllers of the regime would think if they took the trouble to find out what was written in Portuguese on that postcard. Also, the idea of the places that postcard stamped in North Korea would travel through was vertiginous. I was impressed by the possibilities of its route: the hands it would pass through, the thoughts it would provoke. And that which I had written between me, sitting on a bed in a room in Pyongyang, and me, opening the mailbox, another, distant, inhabitant of an incredible future. (Peixoto 2012, p. 198)

By buying the postcard and writing a message on it, the author inscribed (and at the same time celebrated) his presence in the place. The typical photographic postcard emphasises, since its colonial origins, the “authenticity” of a journey (Deroo 2004, p. 165). By including it in the final part of the account, Peixoto addresses that authenticity not only to the readers, but also to himself, assuming (or simulating) a kind of incredibility towards his experience as a tourist in a destination as unlikely (and as secretive) as North Korea.

The message and the image not only take back personal memories, but they are also a way to continue travelling, through the imagination. While recognizing, at various points in his text, that children are also tools that the regime uses to construct its image (and the photograph on the postcard shows nothing more than a prepared scene, with children lined up endorsing different uniforms), it will be with the youngest ones that the author is most often moved. During the trip, children seem to be the only human beings capable of transforming curiosity into a mutual experience, showing the human side that the rest of the population tries to avoid. We can see evidence like this right at the beginning of the text: “Half a dozen boys, ten or eleven years old, approached me. We were talking through smiles and gestures. Without haste, we reached some abstract conclusions” (Peixoto 2012, p. 72). There is also another description in which a North Korean boy gains the courage to leave his group and shake hands: “I haven’t forgotten yet. I don’t know if I’ll forget. (...) I write these words with the exact memory of that touch” (*idem*, p. 164).

Therefore, the choice of the Children’s Palace is not at all casual. Whether it is certain that “[a] travel writer’s choice of what to show in images or tell in writing, among other things, can (...) reveal an ethical or an aesthetic impulse” (Alù & Hill 2018, p. 11), in Peixoto’s travelogue, it is evident that the ethical impulse prevailed. Although the author does not tell us anything about this choice, the positive contacts with children throughout the account (and the ever-present memory of his own children) seem to accentuate the symbolic potential of the postcard and its sentimental meaning. In the end, when the writer arrives home, the postcard works as a kind of relic; it embodies the opportunity for a second journey, a selective view of reality, through which one can see only the best things to be seen.

## 6. Concluding note

As Peixoto’s travelogue shows, North Korea is part of the set of tourist attractions that are fascinating in a negative way, whose appeal is dysphoric, populated with projections that are not in the least reassuring. China itself (namely, the border city of Dandong) is presented to us on the return journey as the paradigm of freedom, when compared with a country like North Korea (Peixoto 2012, pp. 232–233). Peixoto’s descriptions do not reconfigure space according to the conventions of poetic or picturesque vision – everything that is unpleasant remains unpleasant. Even when he spends some time with children, or in the spaces in which they are – considering the spontaneity and innocence that is normally credited to them – the author tells us that reality never surpasses the “thin line between the tenuous and the grotesque” (*idem*, p. 179). The gesture of denouncing,

repudiating, and moving away from the cultural standards of that society is deliberate. That becomes quite clear with the renunciation that the author repeats in writing three times in the book: “I am against all totalitarian regimes and dictatorships” (*idem*, pp. 22, 120). The latent desire to disobey defines the character of this tourist, and the writing follows on.

With spontaneity called into question, the flagrant incongruities, and the repeated sensation of unlikelihood in much of what is apprehended, the author arms himself with sarcasm and irony, prioritising the denunciation of the many stagings he witnesses in his speech: the incoherence of rules and social behaviour; the privileges granted to foreigners, further reinforcing the split between *us* and *them*; the sense of isolation even regarding the other tourists in his group; and, of course, the willingness to document the experience, which is constantly confronted with the prohibition (or strong control) of photographic capture and written notes.

What I proposed was, broadly speaking, an analysis of the way in which, within a travel narrative whose destination was North Korea, the photographs (those which were produced by Peixoto or found in newspapers or in museums, as well as those which were prohibited throughout the journey) act as complex discursive objects of the account as a whole. The narrator’s commitment to *sincerity* and *truth* necessarily brings to the discussion “the relation between the seeable and the sayable, the visible and the articulable, display and discourse, showing and telling, perception and conception or symbol and concept” (Alù & Hill 2018, p. 2), which are still subjects to be theorized and questioned. With individual freedoms continually called into question in the “most militarised country in the world” (Peixoto 2012, p. 44), the only support left to the author was his memory. In that country, where all monuments and spaces of public interest have in their genesis the practice of idolatry and the State creates the conditions for people to register only a filtered reality, what value can a photograph have? As I discussed, beyond the mere souvenir, its value is fundamentally limited, for there is nothing visually exposed not meant to be there. *Dentro do Segredo* shows us that in North Korea we are facing a fabricated reality: images have in their origin an obsessive process of imitating not exactly reality, but its representation. If photography, in general, cooperates with the discourse of similarity, the author makes it clear that in North Korea any creative action that aims to impact upon the real will be sabotaged and condemned right from its genesis: the reality is continuously manipulated, camouflaged, filtered, transformed, and that it is up to the writer to recognise it, to illuminate it, to deconstruct it, until he discovers the whole picture.

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