

MIHAELA NOROC AND HER VIEW ON WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD

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Abstract: Mihaela Noroc's *The Atlas of Beauty* is a phenomenon of today's world. Her endeavour is singular, as she cannot be easily considered as representing one of the traditional types of travel writing: South and West journeys; colonial journeys; symbolic journeys; mythical journeys; or intellectual journeys. She goes for the old-fashioned soul of her 'models'. She is fascinated by their reality, their humanity, and their strength. The *Atlas* convinces by its intrinsic un-biased and non-ideological authenticity. In a sense, Mihaela Noroc is a true follower of Madame d'Aulnoy's literary journeys in Spain in 1691: neither of them passes any judgment on their subject. The *Atlas* is not an instance of travel for travel's sake, either. It does not dwell in an idealistic hope that the more we travel the better we connect, and that the more we understand others, the more we understand about ourselves. The picaresque character is given by the fact that the author is somehow cast out of any society, and, therefore, his/her comments contain more truth. The picaroon is alone, trying to make a living in a world that is based on stereotype and indestructible social traditions. Mihaela Noroc is a picaroon, free of prejudices, non-judgmental, and true.

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Mihaela Noroc's *The Atlas of Beauty* is a phenomenon of today's world. She travels the world to take photos of women, in a quest for outer and inner beauty. She is a Romanian, originally from the Republic of Moldova. She is the daughter of an artist, her father is a painter, and they emigrated from Moldova in the 90's. The financial issues the family had to deal with prevented her from starting a career in the arts – that is in artistic photography – even though she had always been fascinated by photography. After getting married and in possession of a small 'fortune', she decided to start traveling and just seeing the world; at least that was the initial plan. She took her camera like any other tourist might, to capture interesting views and moments. In no time, though, she understood that the camera had a greater importance for her, and she also understood that she had a special interest in portraits of women. She did not just start to take pictures of women, but also to talk to these women, find out their life stories, and that allowed her to capture more than just an exterior image: she went for what was not obvious at a first glance. Mihaela Noroc took the time to have a second and third glance, to look at her models from another perspective, to

try and go beyond differences, even though she describes with her camera a world of difference.

Traditional types of journeys. Her endeavour is singular, as she cannot be easily considered as representing one of the traditional types of travel writing. The following journeys are generally considered to be subscribed to the traditional models:

- a. *South and West journeys.* She did go to very many countries on all continents, which means that her travels did cover a lot of the 'south and west'. Nevertheless, distance does not seem to be very important to her. In a way, she moves around the globe as if it were a planisphere, more than a sphere – she shows the world in its contemporariness, if we may say so. The traditional journey might have insisted on anthropological, religious, philosophical, geographical, or ethnic differences. Her camera, though, seems to not take into consideration any of these, the eye of the camera is always concentrated on the beauty of femininity, on the humanity of her models, and her written entries – scarce as they may be – are very evocative of the personalities of the women in the pictures.
- b. *Colonial journeys.* In a world that re-adjusts its view on history and values, in world of permanent movement of populations Mihaela Noroc does not dwell in such issues of post-colonialism, of displacement and immigration. She does have women in the former European colonies, as well as women in former colonies of non-Europeans (let us not forget that the first colonists were not the Europeans), but she does not spend any time trying to bring to surface historical pains and gains - not that she is not empathic with those who had to leave their houses for whatever reason, or with those whose history is less than 'lucky' -; but she is interested in something else: what is intrinsic womanly about these women. What makes them all share into a very similar ethos and energy.
- c. *Symbolic journeys.* "One man accomplished it – he raised the veil of the goddess at Sais – but what did he see? – wonder of wonders – he saw himself. A favorite of fortune longed to embrace unspeakable nature." Written around 1799 by the German author and philosopher Novalis, the quote comes from the novel *De Lehrlinge zu Sais (The Novices of Sais)* (qtd. In George Koch, "On the Symbolic Journey"). Mihaela Noroc's journey is not a quest for self-discovery (although, obviously, there are many things she must have learned about herself in these years); she does not embark in a kind of rite of passage, either, nor does she want to find the answer to her obsessions or to hunt her hauntings. She is not looking for deep meanings, for layers of symbols or for an

epiphany. She is prepared to take things as they are, naturally, apparently with no sophistication. Nevertheless, we may say that the photographer is guided by a vital force, an entelecheia, a finding of what has driven her in her journeys.

- d. *Mythical journeys.* Although Mihaela Noroc travels all over the world, from Indo-European countries to North and South-American ones; from Polynesia to Australia; from Nunavut to Japan, etc., she seems to not care about old or new gods, about the mythical heroes, or about the tricksters and legendary figures of these places. There are very few hints to myth and legend, as she is trying to capture these women's portraits 'in the now', with their current preoccupation, even when the subjects are seniors, even when they are dressed in their traditional clothes. The 'story' part of the album is dedicated to their actual life conditions, to their biographies, to their dramas and joys, to the most important moments of their lives: birth, marriage, career, youth, and old age. She does not attach any kind of explanation – historical, mythical, heroic – to the living condition of her models, presenting them in 'pure terms' with their lives as they are, without judgment (even if not without praise).
- e. *Intellectual journeys.* If by intellectual journeys we understand a journey in the world of ideas, of books, and of various types of explanations and mental constructs, the *Atlas* is obviously not one of such undertakings. A second understanding of an intellectual journey could be that of travels that are based on a kind of intellectually devised program – I know of these places, their importance for the human history of ideas and developments and I want to 'check them out'. Noroc's view on the world is not marked by any '-isms', by any school of thought; her view of women is not rooted in pre-conceived ideas, or 'need to verify' ideas. She is an artist, but her journey is not artistic in the sense of trying to find instances of the arts, the history of the arts, or artistic beauty. She does find beauty – and the title of this *Atlas* is clear about that – but the beauty she finds is not defined artistically, intellectually, morally or culturally.

To continue the list of the types of travels the *Atlas of Beauty* IS NOT, we could take into consideration other contemporary albums, put together by photographers – which can contain some writing, or not. We are referring, especially, to the so-called *vagabond photographers*, who are followed on Instagram by millions of people, whose images are selected for various contests. Some such vagabonds are Paul Zizka – whose photos are mainly dedicated to dramatic scenery around the world; Steven McCurry – who takes photos of people in various scenes that are relevant from the point

of view of conflict zones, traditions, and culture; Ami Vitale, who is one of the most courageous photographers in the world, taking pictures in conflict zones, and, recently, also turning to wildlife and endangered species; Ira Block, and his special eye for lighting, for the rural life and for animals. Ira is also a speaker, a voice in the world of contemporary photography, as he is also a National Geographic official photographer. There are also photographers like Dirk Bakker, with his focus on modern architecture and repetitive shapes; Simone Bramante, one of the most expensive photographers, employed by such companies as Dior and the like, but who on his Instagram albums is more interested in a kind of visual diary, featuring himself and his son; or the Somalian powerful photographer and story-teller Khadija Farah, who tries to make people hear the oral history of African women.

In speaking about the *Atlas of Beauty* and Mihaela Noroc, to mention such famous photographers and their Instagram photos is very important, because she is also followed by millions of people – both on Facebook and Instagram, her *Atlas* being one of the most interesting cases of today's culture. Her photos were well-known from the Internet, before the publication of the album; by publishing her photos on the Internet she was able to raise the funds for her journeys, when she had spent her own money. Still, when the *Atlas* was, eventually, published, it sold hundreds of thousands of copies... This is one argument that speaks for the importance for an author to be present in the Cyberspace first, and only then try to publish his/her work. The case of John Green is also known, with his book *The Fault in Our Stars*. Green is a writer of young-adult fiction, as well as an international vlogger, who is followed by millions of young people around the world. When he announced that he was writing the book, he also sold a number of copies on the Internet, to raise the money for publication. Mihaela Noroc's *Atlas* was also announced on the Internet, but she also included most of her photos of women, which made her publishing of the *Atlas* rather superfluous – nevertheless, her album was bought by many.

Unlike many of the other photographers we have mentioned above, Mihaela Noroc does not seem to have any agenda, any pre-conceived ideas. Yes, she does encounter various women, with their stories, but these stories are not commented from the point of view of the feminist activist. She has no prejudices, she does not have an activist agenda, and her view of the women she encounters goes beyond super-imposed determinations and characterizations. From her photos, and her descriptions, we may see that the photographer is aware of inequalities, of gender discrimination, and of social and economical injustice; she does understand the contexts and the circumstances of her 'models'. But she is interested in telling a different story. She goes for the old-fashioned soul of her 'models'. She is fascinated by their reality, their humanity, and their strength. Yes, gender roles in

various countries are acknowledged by the author, in the stories she tells – the portrait of Munera from Bangladesh shows that clearly:

I met Munera on the streets of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, in March. She was coming from her university where she studies mathematics.

While mathematics has theorems and rules, beauty shouldn't have any. Beauty, as I see it, is much more than what we see in the media. Real beauty has no bounds. Real beauty is intelligence, is kindness, is wisdom, and it is tolerance. You can find it in Africa, in Asia, in a village, in a skyscraper, in a smile, in a gesture, in an intense gaze, in some wrinkles, in a story. We just have to open our eyes and see it. (Noroc, 44)

So, yes, she is painfully aware of certain social inequalities, of religious and traditional customs, of various patterns that are imposed on women:

I took this photo in Omo Valley, Ethiopia, in 2016. In this remote place, you can see communities living as they did thousands of years ago. Her tribe is called Daasanach and has lived in isolation for generations. With the high temperatures here, nudity is not unusual.

Only 100 kilometres away, you can see some women wearing hijabs, on the way to the mosque, and others wearing thin, white veils, on the way to the church. Further away, in the capital, most of the women adopted a modern way of life. The diversity of this fascinating country is one of the things that inspired me to start this project more than five years ago, during my first journey in Ethiopia. (64)

And, obviously, she is animated by a true humane view on how the world looks like for women – portraits of women overcoming hardship and difficulties, building careers, working hard are illustrating such a humane view - Megumi.

We met on the beautiful streets of Kyoto, Japan, a few weeks ago. Ever since her childhood Megumi wished to become a nurse and help people in need. Her dream became true a few years ago.

But life has its strange paths. Megumi got paralysed and from a nurse, she became a patient. But her wish of helping people and being around them motivated to study hard and find another meaningful job. Today Megumi works in the human resources

department of a company. She found a new way to express her vocation and her love for people”(125)

“*Finding*” a genre for the *Atlas* – *The Atlas* is, obviously, non-fictional. Still, the manner in which it is ‘written’ made me think of Mihaela Noroc as a picaresque, an ageless rogue, and, consequently, her album becomes an instance of the picaresque. In trying to highlight a kind of ‘picaresque spirit’, Angela Willis (in an article dedicated to Reinaldo Arenas’s *El mundo alucinante*), starts from quoting such authors as Eugenio d’Ors, Guillermo Diaz-Plaja, and Alejo Carpentier, in their comments on the revival of the baroque, and a so-called “Baroque Spirit”, or “Constant Baroque”. Willis also quotes Peter Dunn, in his analysis of genre, which he considers to be absolutely necessary for the way we understand the world:

...according to their kind or their categories in order to become receptive to them – is not an exclusively literary [need]. Indeed, our encounters with all the products of culture require that we recognize initially the kind to which they belong, within broad or narrow limits...Genres are more than a system of classification employed by historians and critics, and their function has always been something more than the ascription of themes and subjects to forms and styles. (Dunn, referred to by Willis).

She also refers to Todorov’s famous words about genres in general, in which he considers the so-called ‘transgressions’, or ‘disobediences’ of certain works when discussed within their genre.

...that the work ‘disobeys’ its genre does not make it [the genre] non-existent; one is tempted to say: on the contrary.. first, it seems as if the transgression, for it to exist as such, must have a rule [law] that precisely will be transgressed (Todorov, qtd. by Willis)

Thus, Willis decisively sides with Dunn in his attempt to consider the picaresque not only a genre whose laws and regulations must be observed, but

...as a bundle of possibilities, which could be taken apart, and exploited separately. (Dunn, 94).

From this point of view, we may consider Mihaela NOroc’s *Atlas* a kind of picaresque story: Noroc has no real national identity – she comes from two places at the same time. She has been striving to conform to rules

in order to make a living – which she, luckily failed to do; she is genuine, true to the ‘reader’, she has no kind of formal or official affiliation and, thus, like a true picaroon, she is free. She is also playing with her ‘trade’, with her ‘models’, she has a rather ironic view and a very sharp eye for social pretence.

The texts she writes to accompany her photos are transparent, straightforward, but for any reader – even a less experimented one – it is obvious that she is dedicated to bringing to light not only beauty as such, but beauty against the canvas of social, traditional, religious, political constraints and ‘accepted’ behaviours.

She does not judge, but ‘filters’ reality in fragments of diversity, which she describes with a lot of depth in her photographs, but with a kind of apparent aloofness in the texts. What the journey does for her own self is not merely self-discovery, as a kind of distribution in the role of the picaroon. The picaresque character is the one that is somehow cast out of any society, and, therefore, his/her comments contain more truth. The picaroon is alone, without belonging anywhere, outside society or any ideology, trying to make a living in a world that is based on stereotype and indestructible social traditions. In that sense, Mihaela Noroc is a picaroon, free of prejudices, non-judgmental, and true. From a strictly literary point of view, the form of image and words entries during a journey is nothing but a picaresque story, with the fragmentariness that this genre generally entails.

Consequently, the *Atlas* convinces by its intrinsic un-biased and non-ideological authenticity. Being indebted to no ideology, not embracing any stereotype, and even passing over the more ‘fashionable’ and much marketed views on today’s world (be they ideologies, political view, religious convictions, etc), Mihaela Noroc passes no judgment on her subjects; her eyes are fresh, she describes a world which, even though contemporary, seems to be at its beginnings. In a sense, Mihaela Noroc is a true follower of Madame d’Aulnoy’s literary journeys in Spain in 1691. The *Atlas* is not an instance of travel for travel’s sake, either. It does not dwell in an idealistic hope that the more we travel the better we connect, and that the more we understand others, the more we understand about ourselves. Such ideals of traditional voyages do not necessarily work in today’s world, when we apparently know everything about each other. Mihaela Noroc actually proves that there exists sameness in difference, more than highlights difference itself.

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