

# Flora de Oliveira Lima's Pictures: Stereography, the Picturesque, and the Romantic Sublime

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes late-nineteenth century stereographs unearthed from the Oliveira Lima Library archives in Washington, DC. The stereographs suggest the “I” behind the camera may have been Flora de Oliveira Lima, in her travels across the Swiss Alps and the North of Italy. Taking this hypothesis as a starting point, the article explores gendered constructions in early Lusophone photography and the ways in which Oliveira Lima, a “Victorian from the tropics” according to biographers, appropriates European pictorial and photographic conventions to revert the European gaze.

**Keywords:** photography, stereographs, Lusophone, gender, Romanticism, the Picturesque

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## Las fotografías de Flora de Oliveira Lima. Estereografía, pintoresquismo y lo romántico sublime

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza una serie de vistas estereoscópicas de finales del XIX encontradas en los archivos de la Biblioteca Oliveira Lima en Washington, DC. Estas imágenes sugieren que el “yo” o la mirada detrás de la lente pudo haber sido la de Flora de Oliveira Lima en sus viajes por los Alpes suizos y el norte de Italia. Tomando esta hipótesis como punto de partida, el artículo explora las construcciones de género en la fotografía lusófona temprana y los modos en que Oliveira Lima, una “victoriana de los trópicos”, según sus biógrafos, se apropia de convenciones pictóricas y fotográficas europeas para invertir su mirada.

**Palabras clave:** fotografía, estereografía, lusófono, género, romanticismo, pintoresquismo

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## As fotografias de Flora de Oliveira Lima. A estereografia, o pitoresco e o romântico sublime

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa estereografias do final do século XIX encontradas nos arquivos da Biblioteca Oliveira Lima em Washington, DC. As estereografias sugerem que o “eu”, ou olhar, por trás da lente pode ter sido o de Flora de Oliveira Lima, em suas viagens pelos Alpes suíços e norte da Itália. Tomando essa hipótese como ponto de partida, o artigo explora as construções de gênero na fotografia lusófona inicial e os modos como Oliveira Lima, uma “victoriana dos trópicos” segundo seus biógrafos, se apropria das convenções pictóricas e fotográficas europeias para inverter seu olhar.

**Palavras chave:** fotografia, estereografia, lusófono, gênero, romantismo, pitoresco.

## Introduction

**M**anoel de Oliveira Lima was a prolific writer, historian, diplomat, and continental powerbroker. He traveled far and wide, and wrote travel literature on Argentina, the United States, and even Japan. Biographers contend that were it not for his wife, Flora—who organized his notes, copied his manuscripts, managed his collection, and eventually devoted herself to divulge her late husband's work—Manoel would have not become the *letrado*, the statesman-cum-man of letters, he is known as today.<sup>1</sup> Flora was not only Manoel's wife and assistant; she was his “intellectual companion”.<sup>2</sup> The intellectual parity between husband and wife the Oliveira Lima's enjoyed was uncommon at the time. A time when the merit of illustrious women was first and foremost measured by their husband's public recognition, as a 1921 piece on Flora, titled “Mujeres notables” suggests.<sup>3</sup> Biographers describe the couple as “a showcase marriage of the *Belle Époque*,” Manoel and Flora embodying a forward-thinking dyad.<sup>4</sup> Of their travels, the Oliveira Limas left a trove of textual, pictorial, and photographic records. This article focuses on the latter.

Importantly, some of the photographs suggest the “eye” behind the camera may have been in many cases Flora's. In this study, as in John Mraz' work on photography during the Mexican revolution, “the words ‘it appears’ or ‘it seems to have been’ crop up repeatedly”.<sup>5</sup> For Mraz, such expressions spring from challenges specific to the history of photography, where “the only way to advance is to formulate hypotheses and attempt to identify the photographers [and] what they photographed”. In line with Mraz, this article follows the notion of photographic “double testimony”: photographs

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<sup>1</sup> HENRICH, Nathalia. *Ser ou não ser antiamericano? Os Estados Unidos na obra de Oliveira Lima*. Florianópolis: Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2016, p.77.

<sup>2</sup> MACEDO, Neusa Dias de. *Bibliografia de Manuel de Oliveria Lima*. Recife: Arquivo Público Estadual, 1968, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> ZEBALLOS, E.S. *Mujeres notables de Sud América*. Buenos Aires: Schenone Hnos., 1921, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> MACEDO, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> MRAZ, John. *Photographing the Mexican Revolution*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012, p. 8.

“tell us” about the authors who made them, and “show us frozen fragments of past scenes”. This approach unearths the stories behind image-making, while paying close attention to the circulation of images across borders and cultural imaginaries.

A 1907 portrait of Manoel taken in Japan—immersed in his work, surrounded by books, and flanked by an exquisite *ikebana* flower arrangement—best portrays Flora’s relation to the photographic. Signed by Oliveira Lima himself, the portrait attests to Manoel’s status as a transnational intellectual. On the back, however, a note with Flora’s handwriting complicates the mechanics of representation. The note reads, in English, “Photo taken by *Mme* [*Madame*] M. O. Lima.” With this explicit claim to authorship, the portrait opens up a new avenue of inquiry in the Oliveira Lima Library archive. It demands we revisit Flora’s unpublished work—in this case, her photographic work—and her own persona, as an amateur photographer. The Oliveira Limas had no children. Biographers consider this allowed them to devote their energies to travel and intellectual pursuits. This is not to say that the Oliveira Limas enjoyed a relationship fully between equals. As this picture suggests, Flora’s authorial self was, in more ways than one, subsumed to Manoel’s.<sup>6</sup>

That Flora’s claim to authorship appears in a language other than her own comes as no surprise. Like most elite young women of her time, Flora received an outstanding education in her native Recife, Brazil. Daughter of sugarcane aristocrats, Flora enjoyed the private lessons of an English tutor who transformed her into an “authentic Victorian gentlewoman”.<sup>7</sup> From a Recife young woman, Flora matured into a “Victorian lady in the tropics” as Nathalia Henrich, director of the Oliveira

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<sup>6</sup> Without delving deeper into the matter, historian Ana Huguenin gathers from Flora’s personal letters that taking pictures “with her Kodak” was part of her role in making Manoel, the *letrado* he is known for. HUGUENIN PEREIRA, Ana Carolina. “A escrita feminina no século XIX: as Cartas de Flora de Oliveira Lima e Eufrásia Teixeira Leite,” *Género*, vol. 5, n. 1, 2004, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> CRUZ GOUVÊA, Fernando da. *Oliveira Lima: uma biografia*. Recife: Instituto Arqueológico, Histórico e Geográfico Pernambucano, 1976. Quoted in HENRICH, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Lima Library while I conducted this research, eloquently describes her.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, Flora's hybrid cultural capital—both at the center and at the periphery of colonial networks—shapes her photographic practice.

Media historian Teresa Mendes has studied the marginal status of Lusophone women amateur photographers at the turn of the century, as well as the gendered constructions raised by their work. For Mendes, women amateur photographers have for the most part remained on the margins, if present at all, in histories of early Lusophone photography. This is because historiography has focused mainly on the public dimension of photography, she contends.<sup>9</sup> It has paid scant attention to the private use of photographic albums, the exchange of private images, family photographs, and other aspects of turn-of-the-century photographic popular culture. More attention to women's photographic practice is needed to subvert conventional subject positions, the positions of observer and observed, in the history of optical media. In this article, looking at the stereographs Flora may have taken in her travels through the Swiss Alps and the city of Venice, I expound upon the observed—and the observer—in two ways. First, reading Flora's appropriation of European pictorial and photographic conventions, I highlight her interest in representing landscape and human figures through the Romantic sublime and the picturesque. Second, reflecting on the seemingly counter-current representation of European landmarks in Flora's pictures—an exoticization of the center—I look at her photographic practice as partaking in an important “disruption of the geometrical monopoly on the visual field,” in Western representations of landscape.<sup>10</sup> I therefore address “a difference in vision”—more specifically, a “gender difference and a politics of focus”—that has been “written out of seminal histories of photography” and, I add,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with the author. 22 March 2019.

<sup>9</sup> MENDES FLORES, Teresa. “Maria Pia Fecit,” *Comunicação e Sociedade*, n. 32, 2017, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> SMITH, Lindsay. *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, p. 14.

has seldom been addressed in histories of nineteenth-century Latin American representations of landscape and territories.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1892 and 1895, Manoel Oliveira Lima served as secretary to the Brazilian Legation in Berlin. His appointment allowed the Oliveira Limas to visit Belgium, Holland, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy. In 1895 and 1896, they toured around the Swiss Alps and Venice with Manoel's older sister, Maria Benedicta, and Manoel's brother-in-law (and diplomatic mentor), Pedro de Araújo Beltrão. These tours yielded a series of stereographs (or three-dimensionally illusionistic photographs) that shed light on Flora's photographic practice.<sup>12</sup> Mostly consisting of landscapes and portraits of Maria Benedicta, in these stereographs Flora is "the image present but that never materializes" on frame, as Nathalia Henrich keenly observes.<sup>13</sup>

### **Touching Views, or The Device**

The stereograph was the most popular photographic format of the nineteenth century. First conceived to examine the nature of binocular vision, the stereoscope follows a basic principle. Paired images—shot with a twin-lens camera—produce the enthralling illusion of depth perception, when seen through a binocular stereoscope. The flat, almost-identical images set side by side on a piece of cardboard, or glass plate, gain depth as by a trick of the mind. Through the stereoscope, each eye sees a slightly different perspective of the same composition, creating thus the three-dimensional effect. For the effect to take place, however, eyes and brain must "be in a natural state," explains the inventor of the hand-held stereoscope, the renowned Boston physician

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<sup>11</sup> SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 16

<sup>12</sup> The Oliveira Lima Library houses a rich collection of family albums, scrapbooks, daguerreotypes, photographs, and stereographs. One hundred years after the Oliveira Limas donated them to the Catholic University of America, these materials remain uncatalogued. For this article, I combed through three boxes of stereographs, in paper cardboard and glass support. The glass stereographs contain images of what seems to be the Oliveira Lima estate in Recife, and other locations most likely in Brazil. Paper stereographs record the travels discussed in this article.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the author. 22 March 2019.

and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes.<sup>14</sup> As Holmes describes, putting “slight pressure on one eye” will disturb “convergence”; putting pressure on the brain will have similar results: “Take two or three glasses more than temperance permits, and you see double; the eyes are right enough, probably, but the brain is in trouble, and does not report their telegraphic message correctly,” he flippantly observes.<sup>15</sup> Drawing viewers into the intensified illusion of depth, in the nineteenth century the stereoscope was “the most seductive of photographic formats”; as photography historian Peter Osborne duly notes, “Even today, [it] retains some of its power to amaze”.<sup>16</sup>

The device saw the light of day in London at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851. Scholars have focused on its popularity in the 1850s and 1860s. It is less known that between 1890 and 1914, our period of focus, stereoscopy enjoyed “a significant revival.”<sup>17</sup> In Europe and the United States, it was readily available in schools, homes, and libraries.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, cheap hand-held models turned the stereoscope into the “first photographic mass medium.”<sup>19</sup> Taken by positivism, enthusiasts proposed (pseudo)scientific applications of the apparatus, which ranged from medical applications to recording more “faithful” accounts of racialized subjects,

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<sup>14</sup> HOLMES, Oliver Wendell. “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph.” In: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.) *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Island Books, 1980, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>16</sup> OSBORNE, Peter. *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel, and Visual Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> PLUNKETT, John. “Selling stereoscopy, 1890–1915,” *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 6, n. 3, 2008, p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> The Oliveira Lima Library holds uncatalogued, glass stereographs of Oliveira Lima and family land in the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte. These suggest the Oliveira Limas possessed or had access to the twin-lens camera necessary to produce stereographs in Brazil. Further research is needed to assess the device’s popularity there. Alan Trachtenberg declares that with the mass publication of stereographs “of every imaginable subject (...) the stereoscope became the first universal system of visual communication before cinema and television.” How universal the device was in Latin America is still to be determined. This article focuses on exceptional Latin Americans, a dyad of cosmopolitan and transnational powerbrokers. TRACHTENBERG, Alan. *Reading American Photographs*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1990, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> PETROBRUNO, Sheenagh. “The Stereoscope and the Miniatura,” *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 9, n. 3, 2011, p. 171.

when compared to two-dimensional photography.<sup>20</sup> As they became “a staple of home entertainment,” stereographs circulated through the exchange networks that *cartes de visite* had already consolidated.<sup>21</sup> Millions of stereographic images circulated views of far-away locations, architecture, and landscape, as well as the customs—and costumes—of distant peoples. Given that the device gained popularity during a period marked by globalization and colonialism, many images staged scenes with “exotic” subjects, feeding Orientalist and ethnographic fantasies. For historian John Plunkett, the appeal of the device stemmed “from a deep-seated western desire to erode the gap between the viewing subject and non-local object”.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Holmes prophesized that many would exploit the technology to expand Europe’s imperial eyes.<sup>23</sup> In this article, I explore the views such gaze produced—when it *looked back* at Europe.

Stereographs offer touching views. As such, they verge on the synesthetic. Holmes best portrays the tactile experience provided by the illusion of depth perception: “By means of these two different views of an object, the mind, as it were, *feels round it*, and gets an idea of its solidity. We clasp an object with our eyes, as with our arms, or with our hands, or with our thumb and finger, and then we know it to be something more than a surface”.<sup>24</sup> This synesthetic impression—a seemingly palpable vision—strikes the viewer of stereographs. Drawing on Holmes, David Trotter persuasively argues that the sense of enthrallment inherent in the stereoscope springs from the haptic nature of stereoscopic viewing. For Trotter the stereoscope provides a “tactile look” that, importantly for our

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Pierre Gamsacas and Raoul Lehman’s *La chirurgie enseignée par la stéréoscopie*. Paris, Batière et fils, 1906. For photography’s relation to physiognomy, phrenology, and Francis Galton’s—English statistician and founder of eugenics—method of composite portraiture to define and regulate social deviance, see SEKULA, Allan. “The Body and the Archive,” *October*, n. 39, 1986, pp. 10–12, 19.

<sup>21</sup> TROTTER, David. “Stereoscopy: Modernism and the ‘Haptic,’” *Critical Quarterly*, n. 46.4, 2004, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> “Feeling Seeing’: Touch, Vision, and the Stereoscope,” *History of Photography*, n. 37.4, 2013, p. 396.

<sup>23</sup> Holmes fantasized: “Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their *skins*, and leave the carcasses as of little worth.” HOLMES, *op. cit.*, p. 81. On the discursive construction of, and representations made by, imperial Europe see Mary Louise Pratt’s canonical study *Imperial Eyes*.

<sup>24</sup> HOLMES, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

study, implies “a form of attachment” to what is seen.<sup>25</sup> If “tangibility” was the stereoscope’s “principal attraction,” this particular form of attachment, I argue, also implied a form of possession—made manifest when the illusion of depth perception reconfigures the world for the viewer.<sup>26</sup> This is even more so when the viewer herself is the image-maker, as in Flora’s case—a Victorian from the tropics who, like other Victorian travelers, ventured “in search of treasured landscape” to photograph.<sup>27</sup>

Media historian Jib Fowles proposes a similar assessment of viewer empowerment and stereoscopy. For Fowles, viewers could “in a most elemental way possess [the stereograph]”.<sup>28</sup> Holding the stereograph in their hands, “The sight did not tower over [viewers;] they towered over it,” Fowles contends. Here, I add nuance to this sense of domination, considering the ways in which—by means of the tactile look—viewing subject and stereographic image struggle for possession. If the haptic is an “agent in the formation of space” that, bridging our senses of spatiality and motility, “shap[es] the texture of habitable space and map[s] our ways of being in touch with the environment,” then the different “takes” Flora has left behind trace the reciprocal construction of viewing subject and viewed space, as she travelled through Europe’s natural and cultural landmarks.<sup>29</sup>

Through her stereo-pictures, I thus explore the possessive violence stereoscopy implies—stereoscopy’s “disembodied mastery and proprietorial gaze”.<sup>30</sup> Looking at the pictorial conventions Flora’s pictures betray, I examine how her stereographs shape a contested site in which viewer and image struggle to possess each other—a struggle that brings together observer and observed by means of the Romantic

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<sup>25</sup> TROTTER, David. “Stereoscopy: Modernism and the ‘Haptic,’” *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 46, n. 4, 2004, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> PLUNKETT, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

<sup>27</sup> TAYLOR, John. *A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography, and the Tourist’s Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> FOWLES, Jib. “Stereography and the Standardization of Vision,” *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 17, n. 2, 1994, p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> BRUNO, Giuliana. *Atlas of Emotion*. New York: Verso, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> OSBORNE, *op. cit.*, p. 67.



sublime and the picturesque. Again, Holmes sheds light on the matter. As the viewer is absorbed into the stereo-view, for Holmes, “The mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture. The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out (...) There is such a frightful amount of detail, that we have the same sense of infinite complexity which Nature gives us”.<sup>31</sup> Holmes suggests a hand-held experience of the Sublime: both absorbing and uncanny, miniaturized and vast. The potentiality of “Nature” appears both threatening and alluring for the subject.<sup>32</sup> With this interplay, the stereograph offers an enticing desire to possess such views. Unlike an oil painting, or even a photograph, for Holmes the stereograph reveals, “as many beauties lurking, unobserved, as there are flowers that lush unseen in forests and meadows”.<sup>33</sup> The stereoscope promises an immersive experience that is both titillating and somewhat threatening; an experience that, ultimately, invites the viewer not to be taken by the landscape, but to take it.



Figure 1. Maria Benedita (lower left) looks at the Matterhorn (overexposed above). All images courtesy of Oliveira Lima Library, Catholic University of America.

<sup>31</sup> HOLMES, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> Speaking from a contemporary viewpoint, Osborne notes that the “fineness and multiplicity of detail” in stereographs seen through the stereoscope can “become overwhelming.” I concur. OSBORNE, *op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> HOLMES, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

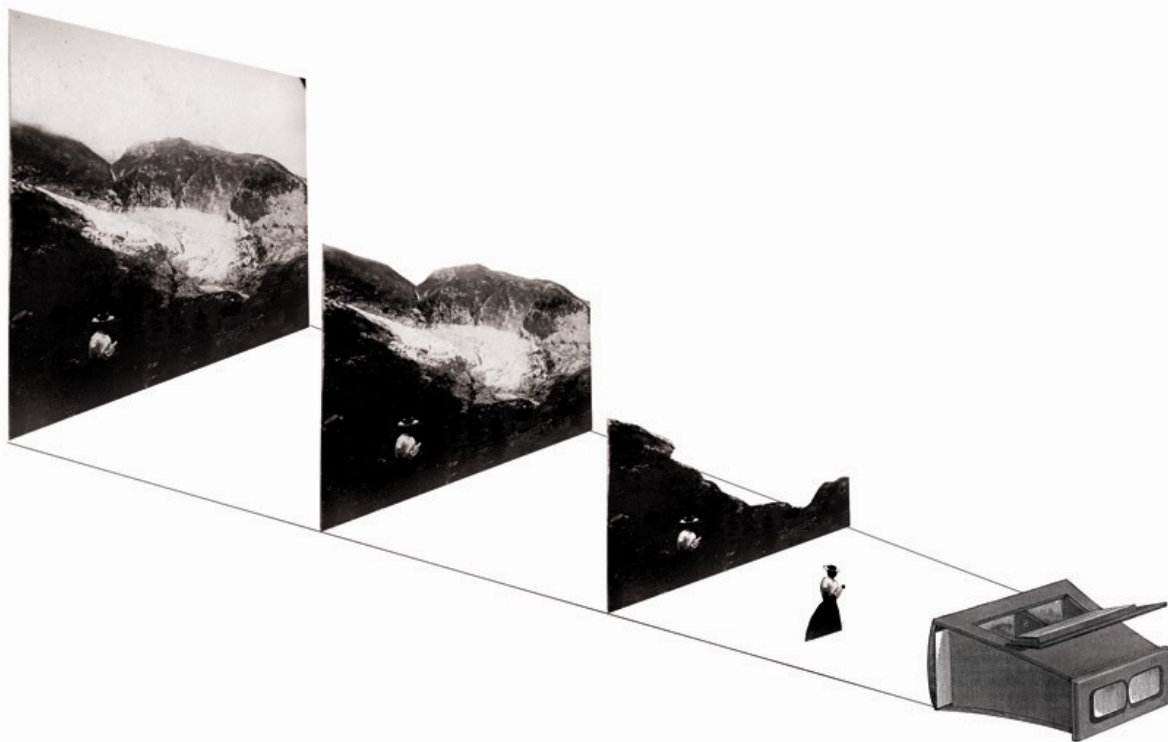


Figure 2. 2D rendition of 3D planar illusion. Design by Catalina Ospina Leon.

Indeed, the stereoscope yields an image that for the viewer *feels* palpable. But the reality-effect it produces changes depending on contrast, grain, and the location of objects in the composition. For example (Figure 1), a stereograph reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's Romantic landscapes shows Maria Benedicta in the foreground, contemplating a view of the Matterhorn, in the Swiss Alps. Lack of contrast prevents the viewer from clearly making out the human figure in the lower left. Seen through the stereoscope, however, the Riffelalp landscape recedes into three planes, while the vaguely hinted figure of Maria Benedicta protrudes towards the viewer. Like a phantasm, she gradually materializes. Her dark skirt progressively solidifies, as if out of thin air, into the separate plane that distinguishes her from the receding background. Thus proceeds stereoscopic depth perception, "by converging outlines, distribution of light and shade, change of size and of texture of surfaces".<sup>34</sup> Notice how, lacking contrast, her dark skirt is almost imperceptible in two

<sup>34</sup> HOLMES, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

dimensions. Through the stereoscope, however, elements in the foreground—protruding—become visible, and almost palpable. Maria Benedicta looks solid to the touch. In the shift from monocular to binocular perspective, “we see something with the second eye, which we did not see with the first,” says Holmes.

And yet, Maria Benedicta appears eerily separated from the background by a void, highlighting the planar nature of the illusion (Figure 2). Through the stereoscope, elements arrange themselves along planes that separate foreground and multiple receding backgrounds by voids. Unlike in pictorial representations or even in natural binocular perception, stereoscopic perspective does not recede smoothly into the distance. Instead, the stereographic image appears multi-layered, a “steep gradient of different planes”.<sup>35</sup> For Osborne, such visual arrangement implies an “uncanny” effect, hinting again at a Romantic undertow shaping the experience of this technology.<sup>36</sup> We perceive individual elements in the stereoscopic image as flat cutouts, arranged either nearer to or further from us. But, as Jonathan Crary notes, the experience of space between these objects (or planes) is not one of gradual and predictable recession; rather, there is a “vertiginous uncertainty about the distance separating the forms”.<sup>37</sup> The effect demands intellectual, affective, and bodily effort from the viewer. As one scans the stereograph, one moves—visually—through the stereoscopic tunnel. From inspecting the nearest ground to concentrating on an object in the middle-distance, one has the sensation of refocusing one’s eyes. And then again, into the farthest plane, “another effort is made, and felt, to refocus”.<sup>38</sup> Human figures yield particularly contradictory effects. They seem to have been “rescued from the past by the image’s power to replicate space” and yet they seem

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<sup>35</sup> KRAUS, Rosalind. “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” *Art Journal*, vol. 42, n. 4, 1982, p. 314.

<sup>36</sup> OSBORNE, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> CRARY, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer*. Boston: MIT Press, 1992, p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> KRAUS, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

unreal. Osborne eloquently puts it. Human figures seem “like actors preserved in an ancient hologram, performing in some allegorical piece endlessly re-enacted”.<sup>39</sup>

As the first photographic mass medium, the stereoscope brought closer views from faraway places and peoples. Thus, the device “domesticated as well as miniaturized” early nineteenth-century forms of large-scale three-dimensional entertainment, most notably the panorama, which “exhibited ‘exotic’ urban and natural scenes as public spectacles”.<sup>40</sup> For the Brazilian travelers, the Matterhorn may have been as exotic as Sugarloaf Mountain was for Europeans. For now, we will leave aside the questions of scale this device brought about. We will delve instead into the process of exoticizing both cityscapes and landscapes through binocular vision. Lest we forget, the device promised the possibility of possessing the very cities and territories it put on display, as the often-repeated advertising cry for the London Stereoscopic Company suggested, “Seems Madam? NAY IT IS!”<sup>41</sup>

### Urban Picturesque

Let us depart from the Swiss Alps and continue traveling southbound with Flora and Maria Benedicta. In 1896 they visited Venice, where Flora may have registered with her camera the city’s eternal landmarks: Piazza San Marco, St. Mark’s Basilica, Rialto bridge, and the Bridge of Sighs, among other sites. Many of her pictures seem to bridge the gaps of time. Avoiding dark spaces while favoring open stretches of the city—on land or water—her stereographs include views of the sinuous Grand Canal, the Piazza, even views from the basin of San Marco; views that had been explored by Romantic painters and travel writers long before. However, her compositions, and the subjects they portray, reveal a form of possession specific to late-nineteenth century representation. An appropriation of the European pictorial convention of the

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<sup>39</sup> OSBORNE, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> PIETROBRUNO, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in PLUNKETT, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

urban picturesque, to be precise. Thus, in these pictures, the eternal luster of Venice gives way to an aestheticized-yet-critical view of its transient, urban outcasts. If, for Romantic visitors, Venice represented a stone theatre arranged to instigate reverie and wonder—the *città galante* frozen in time, a city of “myth and stones,” as Denis Cosgrove puts it in his study of symbolic landscape—Flora’s pictures seem to depart from this perspective to look instead at Venetians’ bodily experience of the city, harnessing the urban picturesque.<sup>42</sup> As such, her stereographs propose a dialectics of “flesh and stone,” to loosely borrow from Richard Sennett’s eponymous book on life and the city.<sup>43</sup>

The English clergyman, artist, and writer William Gilpin (1724-1804) first coined the term “picturesque” to describe, rather tautologically, “such objects, as are proper subjects for painting,” in a 1792 essay.<sup>44</sup> In later publications, Gilpin developed the concept further, considering the picturesque somewhere between the beautiful—that is, symmetric, orderly compositions—and the sublime—with its vastness, roughness, and overwhelming magnitude. During the eighteenth century, the term was reserved for discussions of landscape aesthetics. In the nineteenth century, as art historian Mark Andrews indicates, the term emerged “as both a ridiculous cliché and a concept of baffling complexity; and there it remains today”.<sup>45</sup> In his study, Andrews retrieves the concept, from its use to evaluate the representation of landscape and rural life in the late-eighteenth century, to re-read it in the context of the Victorian city. He concludes that the urban picturesque resonates with an aesthetics of poverty, “attracted by dilapidation and obsolescence in architecture and [by] impoverished and marginalized human beings”.<sup>46</sup> Borrowing from his observations, in this section

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<sup>42</sup> COSGROVE, Denis. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. London: Croom Helm, 1984. p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> SENNETT, Richard. *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. New York: Norton, 1994, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> GILPIN, William. *Three Essays*. London: R. Blamire, 1792, pp. 36-37.

<sup>45</sup> ANDREWS, Malcolm. “The Metropolitan Picturesque.” In: Copley, Stephen (ed.) *The Politics of the Picturesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 282.

<sup>46</sup> ANDREWS, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

I tackle Flora's appropriation of the picturesque in her stereographic renderings of Venice.

As a "Victorian from the Tropics," visiting Venice may have sparked in Flora the magnetic hold the city had on the imagination of the Grand Tourist. For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century elite (male) Britons, the Grand Tour through Europe, with its mandatory stop in Venice, "offered a heady combination of aesthetic, social, [and] political experience (...) [It] provided its alumni with a life-long source of cultural and political authority".<sup>47</sup> Following the steps of the Grand Tourists, and as tourism became increasingly enjoyed by circles other than the nobility, late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers also visited Venice in search for cultural capital. A letter from Maria Benedicta suggests as much, as she highlights the (indoor) cultural treasures she witnessed on a later trip to Milan, such as Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin* that she compares to other Renaissance masterpieces she saw in Venice.<sup>48</sup> As a woman amateur photographer, however, Flora's interest may have not been only to accrue such capital at home by registering her daring travels abroad. By paying close attention to marginal figures in the city, Flora's stereographs betray an appropriation of urban landscape and the conventions of the picturesque with a different purpose. They suggest, rather, an aesthetics of poverty—as well as a sympathetic rapport to the human figures she portrays. Her pictures thus reveal an affective and tactile dimension, as she seems touched by those she encounters in the floating city.

In her stereographs, Flora brings marginal figures to the foreground (Figure 3). Historical landmarks receding to the background—such as the Doge's Palace or the Basilica—the photographer gives prominence to a peasant or gipsy woman accompanied by her daughter, perhaps; or, in a different stereograph, a ragged boy bent on carrying a heavy load while a girl, equally dressed, approaches an idle man in

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<sup>47</sup> REDFORD, Bruce. *Venice and the Grand Tour*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, p.17.

<sup>48</sup> BELTRÃO, María. Letter to Manoel Oliveira Lima. 2 Apr 1897. Correspondence Collection Box B2, folder 3, Oliveira Lima Library, The Catholic University of America, Washington DC.

a hat and leather shoes, perhaps asking for a coin. Likewise, the *Loggetta del Sansovino*—a small building at the base of the bell tower in St. Mark's square, built between 1538 and 1546 that historically served as gathering place for nobles and the *Procuratori di San Marco*, the Basilica's treasurers—becomes in Flora's pictures the gathering place of street urchins. Thus, a series of contrasts shape her compositions: pomp and poverty, eternity and impermanence, stone and flesh. Stripping off the city's luster, *the città galante* as Grand Tourists would eulogize Venice,<sup>49</sup> Flora's pictures impose a different take on public space—Venice's architecture contradictorily adorned with impoverished and marginalized human figures.



Figure 3. Woman and girl before the Doge's Palace (upper left).

These images evince Flora's predilection for certain human figures in her aesthetics of poverty—children. But at the same time, they beg the question of the “truth-value” of her compositions. The belief of photographic objectivity characterized most popular attitudes toward photography during the nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> For the most part, photographs were conceived as direct impressions of the visible world. But it is

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<sup>49</sup> REDFORD, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

worth asking, is Flora simply registering the sites she visits in her pictures? Or, is she composing picturesque canvases of flesh and stone? Lindsay Smith, in her study on women and children in nineteenth-century photography, argues that “photography and the child converge around a dominant fantasy of, or investment in, naturalism in the second half of the nineteenth century”.<sup>51</sup> As such, photography assumed a naïve viewer of an unmediated “natural” record. This assumption in turn presupposes a power relation. As many scholars have argued, situating photography and naturalism in the context of Foucault’s work on discourses of surveillance and social control, photography implies “a perceptual mastery along geometrical lines,” which amounts to “an authoritative mapping of the visual”.<sup>52</sup> Especially in the history of documentary photography, the medium has been used to document, catalog, and therefore appropriate subaltern figures under standardized parameters for capturing subjects. Cesare Lombroso’s use of photography, with standardized distances and focal lengths in the development of criminology, immediately comes to mind.<sup>53</sup> This is not the place to linger on Lombroso’s questionable “scientific” method for composing mug shots, but it is the place to highlight how geometrical perspective, the dominant Western system for articulating three-dimensional space as two dimensional, imposes a power relation between vantage-point (the eye of the observer) and vanishing-point (the culmination of the look upon a subject) that concludes in the effective subjection of the photographed human figure.

Nineteenth-century women’s photography challenges the appropriations of photographic depth of field—both to the authority of the geometrical model and to pictorial style—as highly problematic. To the “sovereignty of geometrical

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 25.

<sup>53</sup> For nineteenth-century positivists, Sekula writes, photography promised “a wealth of detail [and] reduce nature to its geometrical essence. Presumably then the archive could provide a standard physiognomic gauge of the criminal (...) assign each criminal body a relative quantitative position within a larger ensemble.” SEKULA, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



perspective”,<sup>54</sup> women amateur photographers responded with a photographic practice away from the public dimension of photography, as I previously mentioned. Shaped by the private use of family photos, the exchange of private images, and the private use of photographic albums, women amateur photography proposes a use of depth of field mediated by closeness rather than distance. As such, it subverts the conventional subject positions of observed and observer. Read in this way, Flora’s pictures remove the intervening distance between vantage-point and human figure. The great Venetian monuments receding to the background, Flora offers a take on the city’s disenfranchised children premised on proximity, closeness, and empathic interest.

This is not to say that Flora eschews altogether the tourist gaze that—with the introduction of the Kodak roll-film camera in the 1880s and the correlative beginnings of amateur travel photography—turned distant locales into quaint objects of visual pleasure. Such way of seeing, converting the cultural Other into spectacle, identifies the tourist with a figure of mastery such as the explorer or the anthropologist.<sup>55</sup> In this vein, Flora focuses on other marginal figures such as peasant women and fishermen to exoticize them. Flora and Maria Benedicta visited Torcello, a small island at the northern end of the Venetian Lagoon, that attracts sightseers who visit the imposing Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta (built in 639) and its splendid golden mosaics. A visit to the island’s (in)famous Devil’s bridge (Figure 4), source of legends of Venice’s surrender to Austrian domination, allows Flora to register the locals. A young peasant woman and a man look, impassive, at the camera; while the elderly woman, standing three-quarters, stares off-frame. Their inscrutable expressions guide the viewer to their clothing—patterned skirts and aprons for the women, a modest ensemble and worn shoes for the man—suggesting their humble status. Likewise, a stereograph of “old fishermen” (Figure 5), the caption on the verso

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> STRAIN, Ellen. “Exotic Bodies, Distant Landscapes: Touristic Viewing and Popularized Anthropology in the Nineteenth Century,” *Wide Angle*, vol. 18, n. 2, 1996, pp. 72-73.

reads, shows a motley crew: two older men—one crouched as he tends to his nets; the other, well-dressed, looking at the camera—and two young men intently looking at the fisherman's work. All comprise a quaint scene in which each human figure plays its role in this still-frame of everyday life.



Figure 4. Three human figures before the Devil's bridge (center).



Figure 5. "Old fishermen," reads a hand-written note on the stereograph.

These pictures transform local Venetians into types, defined by their traditional trades and costumes. Thus, revealing a *costumbrista* tendency in line with the work of

other contemporary Lusophone photographers who represented in their photographs “regional types”.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, with these compositions Flora partitions the floating city. In both examples, canals frame the inhabitable space of the peasantry. They separate fisherman and crew from Flora’s vantage-point, thus segregating observer and observed. At the Devil’s bridge, the canal imposes a diagonal that constrains the human figures to half of the frame—the young man squatting, seemingly at the very edge of the space available for him. Acting as visual notes, canals demarcate boundaries in Flora’s Venice. Particularly in Torcello, they divide and stratify the sites—timeless grandeur and marginalized figures inhabiting separate spaces of the Venetian landscape.

As a woman amateur photographer, even in the stereographs that depict the Venetian “underside” or periphery, we cannot subscribe Flora’s aesthetics as urban picturesque *tout court*. As the examples I consider suggest, “touching” elements—street urchins, incidental glimpses of everyday life—convey a representation that goes beyond an aesthetics of poverty or a positivistic conception of the camera as a dispassionate recording tool. Flora’s stereographs vividly make marginal Venetians visible, while also showcasing the materiality of the city they inhabit—eternal yet historical, magnificent but stratified. As John Taylor highlights in his historical study on photography and landscape, the length of time spent looking at the scene or photograph further complicates the act of looking. It suggests “more than the fascination of the viewer,” and “endows the scene or picture itself with special, perhaps mystic significance”.<sup>57</sup> This effect may be even stronger when looking at stereographs. As the eyes take time to adapt to the three-dimensional image, a prolonged investment—in time—is needed for the enthralling effect to take place. It yields an otherworldly, if not mystic, significance to what is seen.

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<sup>56</sup> MENDES, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>57</sup> TAYLOR, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

## Conclusion

It is not farfetched to assume that Flora, like other makers of stereoscopic images in the late-nineteenth century, aimed not only to (re)create “simply likeness, but immediate, apparent *tangibility*”.<sup>58</sup> As David Trotter observes, the illusion of depth perception that only the stereoscope can offer implies an “assertiveness with which objects in the foreground occupy space,” producing the feeling that “one could reach out and touch them, or be touched by them”.<sup>59</sup> In this article, I looked at the images Flora de Oliveira Lima may have produced during her travels to trace a twofold form of possession in which Flora, and her family, assert themselves over the (sublime) Swiss landscape and the (picturesque) city of Venice. In these images, it seems that Flora imposes her tourist gaze and thus reconfigures these European landmarks, while nevertheless allowing herself to be taken by the views. Her stereoscopic images therefore consist of a record of the places and spaces she visited. But, in the process of turning sites into almost-palpable sights, these images also limn the discursive and aesthetic bearings Flora deployed to reconfigure—and reshape—the world she possessed through the illusion of depth perception. If, through the stereograph, “the mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture,” as Holmes rightfully claims, Flora’s images partake in the constitution of space, landscape, *and* viewing subject—all at once.<sup>60</sup> Displaying picturesque, Romantic Sublime, and even Naturalist influences, these images trace discursive and aesthetic forces shaping spatial and subject formations in stereographic form. Importantly, Flora’s stereographs redeploy these forces, usually coded European, to exoticize European landscapes and pauperize European subjects. As such, her stereographs oscillate between the imperatives of recording and pictorializing Europe, between attesting to certain

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<sup>58</sup> CRARY, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>59</sup> TROTTER, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>60</sup> HOLMES, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

“truths” available to her as she traveled the Old World, and appropriating the latter with artistic and affective conventions in her photographic practice.

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