

## *Communication in Silence? Relational Interstices in Edward S. Curtis's Portrait Photographs (The North American Indian, 1907-1930)*

MATHILDE ARRIVÉ

UNIVERSITÉ MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE BORDEAUX 3

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**ABSTRACT:** E. S. Curtis's portrait photographs are problematic visual interfaces between the self and the other where the ambiguities of the American imperial psyche at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are crystallised and refracted. Though the visual paradigm may function as an instrument of symbolic and imaginary appropriation, allowing the imperial psyche to satisfy its hegemonic impulses and to confirm its essentialist beliefs, it may also work as a dynamic *locus* of cultural articulation where the ethnographic gaze may be reversed – not to say reciprocated – and where the otherness of the Other may ultimately emerge.

**Keywords:** Edward Sheriff Curtis, Indians of North America, photography, ethnography, ethnic identity, intercultural gaze, intracultural processes.

**RESUMEN:** Los retratos fotográficos de E. S. Curtis constituyen una interfaz visual problemática entre el individuo y su «otro», en donde aparecen cristalizadas y refractadas las ambigüedades de la psique imperial estadounidense a comienzos del siglo XX. Aunque el paradigma visual puede funcionar como un instrumento de apropiación simbólica del imaginario, permitiendo a la psique imperial satisfacer sus impulsos hegemónicos, así como confirmar sus convicciones esencialistas, también puede operar como un *locus* dinámico de articulación cultural donde la mirada etnográfica se puede invertir o incluso reciprocarse, permitiendo a la misma alteridad del Otro emerger en última instancia.

**Palabras clave:** Edward Sheriff Curtis, Indios norteamericanos, fotografía, etnografía, identidad étnica, mirada intercultural, procesos intraculturales.

As etymology suggests, communication is a relational commerce between two or more parties – individual or collective – involved in a more or less

successful exchange of signs. The prerequisite for communication is that these signs be commonly encoded to allow the transmission and reception of a message. Within the same cultural environment, communication is a conventional process, resting on pre-determined, transitive codes. The message may well be unclear, ambiguous or controversial, but the process of communication *as such* is not problematic. It is taken for granted.

But when the inter-*subjective* dimension (difference between persons) is further dialectized by the inter-*cultural* one (difference between cultures) it is the communicational process itself which is at stake: the intercultural ingredient literally *de-familiarizes*<sup>1</sup> communication by injecting discontinuity and surprise, leading to a constant and dynamic readjustment of the communicational pact. Communication is *de-naturalized* as it reveals itself as a contingent, relative, fragile interface between agents at a loss for common signs, codes and cultural referents. While *intracultural* communication rests on the instrumental transparency of a message (the signified) *intercultural* communication inevitably places its focus on the signs themselves (the signifiers), on their conventional nature, their functions and effects as well as their degree of validity in their relation to both the enunciator and the addressee. For all these reasons, intercultural communication is a cultural challenge that destabilizes frames of reference and puts to the test the overall cultural matrix in which they originate.

In the intercultural context, the binary system of *transmission* / *reception* on which communication traditionally rests is disrupted, or rather energised, with the introduction of a third agency in the communicational chain, that of *mediation*, which operates precisely «between» transmission and reception. The point of this essay will be to identify whether photography, in E. S. Curtis's *The North American Indian* (1907-1930),<sup>2</sup> can function as a workable mediation, a productive interstice, a collaborative site of cultural articulation of the self and the other, of distance and proximity, that could

[...] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative signs of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. [...] It is in the

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1. The term «defamiliarisation» was coined by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky when he discussed the *modus operandi* of poetic language and how it relied on some unfamiliar rendering of the world. I use this literary term purposefully to point at the possible homology between the defamiliarizing effects of «the technique of art» – as he called it – on language, and that of the intercultural negotiation on communication.
  2. In relation to the topic of «intercultural communication», we chose to limit the scope of our analysis of *The North American Indian* to portrait photography, where the question of the intercultural encounter is explicit, being both staged in the photograph, and experienced upstream in the act of production, and downstream in the act of reception of the photograph.

emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (Bhabha, 1994: 1-2)

What is «inter» – be it *interaction*, *intercession*, *interpretation* – is fundamentally fluid and dynamic. This lability may well be highly productive but can also be very easily disrupted, and degenerate into various anti-relational postures. The shaky grounds on which intercultural communication stands point at what we may call «the *predicament* of communication». <sup>3</sup> It is this hesitancy of intercultural communication in E. S. Curtis's *The North American Indian*, and the way it resonates both at the level of the representation and at the level of the represented, that will be of interest for the cultural critic. Is the symbolic and plastic space of the photograph a confirmation of the racial hierarchy and a mere continuation of power struggles taking place in the social arena, or does it provide an alternative, dissident scenario for intercultural relationships? Is the photographic distance a disjunctive distance that alienates or a conjunctive distance that relates?

The second set of questions has to do with the visual modality of the photographic medium which, more than any other, seems to reinforce the «predicament» of communication. We may wonder indeed if there is such a thing as communicators without a voice: is the speechless agent *above* cultural complexity or immersed *in* it? Is silence an escapist strategy to bypass the intercultural encounter or a means to experience it otherwise?

For the cultural critic, «the medium is the message» (McLuhan, 1967). And indeed photography, as a site for cultural enunciation, discloses its own strategies and mechanisms, thus *communicating* a lot about *itself* and about the underlying ethnographic project resting on it, for «if transparency signifies discursive closure – intention, image, author – it does so through a disclosure of its *rules of recognition* – those social texts of epistemic, ethnocentric, nationalist intelligibility [...]» (Bhabha, 1994: 110). Our analysis will therefore consist in decoding, not the codes, but the process of encoding itself.

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3. This title is an echo of James Clifford's (1988) *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, which discusses the ambiguities and inconsistencies of the ethnographic gaze on the Other, and the difficulty today to redefine the grounds on which to found the ethnographic method.

## 1. Cultural Essentialism and the Conspicuous Absence of Intercultural Communication

### 1.1. Inventing «Pre-contact» Indians

When it comes to «intercultural communication», an effort of contextualization<sup>4</sup> and re-historicization is required. Although today post-colonial studies have put forward the idea of intercultural negotiation as a positive and dynamic agency in the process of identity-making, the intercultural encounter was regarded in turn-of-the-century America as potentially dangerous, jeopardizing cultural integrity at a time when the notions of unity and stability of forms, meaning and references were exalted. In the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of interculturality was foreign to the American «either-or» cultural logic to the extent that «Indian» and «American» had become exclusive cognitive categories. The Other was more an enemy to be subdued than a cultural ally.

In accordance with this geopolitical and epistemological context, E. S. Curtis viewed interactions between cultures and its corollaries – acculturation, syncretism, hybridity – as fundamentally corrupt and degenerative. Therefore, what he tried to recapture (or rather to reconstruct) was «the pre-contact Indian», in a word, the way Native Americans were *prior* to intercultural communication. The caption that accompanies «Mosa» (fig. 1) makes this very clear:

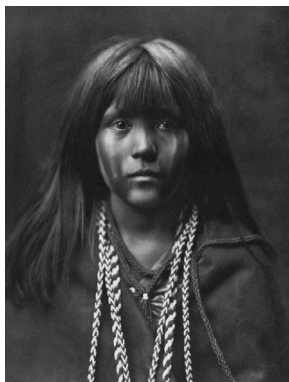
It would be difficult to conceive of a more thorough aboriginal than this Mohave girl. Her eyes are those of the fawn of the forest, questioning the strange things of civilization upon which it gazes for the first time. She is such a type as Father Garces may have viewed on his journey through the Mohave country in 1776. (Portfolio 2, List of Plates Supplementing Volume II, n. p.)

This essentialist view of culture only nurtured the unrealistic fantasy of a world of fixed cultural essences, resulting in a blind denial of the event of intercultural communication. More generally, this search for «pre-contact» Indians says a lot about the early days of American anthropology, at a transitional time when the method of «observant participation» had just started to be worked out but was not yet fully accepted by amateur ethnologists. Symptomatically, everything that

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4. We may draw a rough outline of the major historical landmarks: in 1830, President Andrew Jackson voted the Indian Removal Act, which initiated the westward displacement (especially in Oklahoma) of Indian tribes. This law was at the root of many conflicts, some of which continued till 1838. Up to 1850, 100,000 Indians were deported: the Trail of Tears (1838-1839) remains the most notorious. In June 25, 1873, Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors defeated the US Army at Little Bighorn. The Wounded Knee Massacre (Lakota, December 29, 1890) was the last major armed conflict between the Lakota Sioux and the United States.

could betray interaction with Native Americans in *The North American Indian* was concealed, erased, muted as a shameful sign of ethnologic incompleteness.



**fig. 1.** Mosa-Mohave

To that extent, photography may have represented the ideal outlet for E. S. Curtis since it enabled the photographer to *extract* himself from the predicament of intercultural communication, sublimating this aborted experience into a scene which he thought he registered from the outside, without participating in it. As Susan Sontag (1973: 12) points out, this power of abstraction from actual experience is inherent to the photographic activity: «the person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene». But E. S. Curtis carries the photographic logic of incommunicability to its extreme by staging it in the very content of the photographic artefacts. Indeed, the rejection of intercultural communication is dramatized through the devising of a sort of visual apartheid where Indian figures stand on their own, as if impervious to white presence, isolated in the cell-like photographic frame. (fig. 2)



**fig. 2.** Apsaroke woman

It is as if the Indian world was relegated to some photographic «reservation», an extension and confirmation within the space of representation of the ongoing «tribal» politics of the time. Among the 4,000 photographs E. S. Curtis took never is the white presence made visible – an invisibility which should not be mistaken for a vacuum, but rather construed as an oblique presence which refuses to mix with that of the Other. Therefore, one should not be tricked by the overt stance of invisibility, which, though it is a statement of incommunicability, also coexists with assimilationist impulses.

After having expounded the ideological matrix of Curtis's anti-communicational stance, we will now analyse how his essentialist assumptions find some consolidating foundations in the visual paradigm itself (the signifying structure of representation) and how they are then literalised in the photographic diegesis (the signified content of the photograph).

## 1.2. The Anti-Dialogic Mode: the Visual Paradigm and its Hypertrophy

One may start stating the obvious for, indeed, it is almost tautological to observe that the visual is the anti-dialogic mode at its utmost. In its structural stasis, completion, and autonomy, the photographic artefact appears right away as the monolithic – one should say «the monocular»<sup>5</sup> – made tangible. It is all the more true as regards Curtis's pseudo-ethnographic photographs since they are allegorised and de-contextualized from the *hic et nunc* of the photographic act and therefore lack the «situatedness» that Bakhtin (1981) defines as the prerequisite for actual communication. In linguistic terms, decontextualization abstracts enunciators and receptors from the very *pragmatics* of visual communication, which, alone, can turn communicational items into proper intelligible messages.

In addition, the precedence of the visual paradigm over the discursive one entails a statically *descriptive* approach to the Other through the production of a one-dimensional, stabilized, hence static «picture» far from the elusive complexity of linguistic transactions between cultures. Hence the substitution of communication for its lesser version, visibility, which Bhabha (1994: 127) identifies as «the priority of “knowledge of” over “knowledge that”», «the

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5. *The monolithic and the monocular* are paralleled in *The North American Indian*, for the same authoritative treatment is applied to both Indian words and Indian faces. Indeed, the descriptive quality of the visual finds its textual corollary in the form of glossaries, catalogues and lists, which anthologize Indian dialects just as the photographic *eye/l* anatomises the visibility of their bodies and faces. In the wake of Bakhtin, we may see in this process of dictionary-making the transformation of speech into «language», i.e. its systematic reduction. «Language» is to speech what the (anthropometric) portrait is to the human face, what the image is to the word: its static, quaint, inert duplication.

priority of the visual relation between persons and objects over the justificatory, textual relationship between propositions». The precedence of the scrutiny of the *eye* over the elusiveness of the *voice*, or to put it differently, of the visible over the dialogic, betrays Curtis's desire not to *understand* – via communication –, but his need to *explain* the Other and therefore to rationalize, classify, standardize and chart North American Indians, contemplated as objects on which he may exert his explicative rationality as he would on a zoological or geologic curiosity. In that regard, Indians could be said to be «communicated *upon*»<sup>6</sup> as underlined by the photo of a man looking upwards in awe as if dwarfed by the burden of Curtis's gaze upon him. (fig. 3)

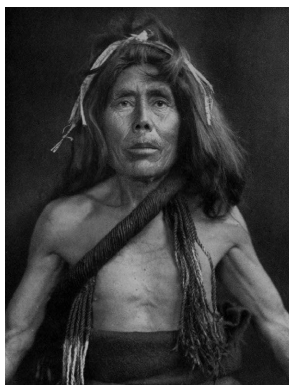


fig. 3. Kekuhtlala (Koeksotenok)

Photography so far appears as both a separate space and a space that separates – a space that generates distance, a locus for alienation rather than communication or expression.

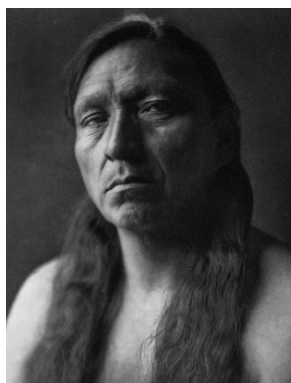
### 1.3. Staging / Stating Incommunicability

In Curtis's *The North American Indian*, there are two anti-communicational paradigms of relationship: the *agonistic* model (fig. 4), where the warlike protagonists seem to confront the observer in a posture that leads to equating the photographic relationship with a visual duel, as if the century-long conflicts between Native Americans and the United States surfaced in the photograph in a subliminal way.

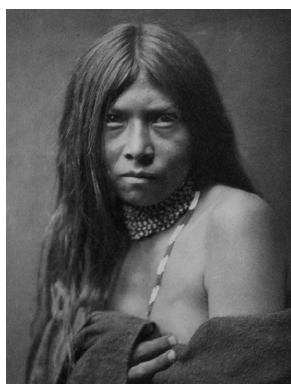
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6. The phrase «communicated upon» is a variation on Bhabha's (1994: 16) own commentary on «victims of projected fears, anxieties and dominations» who are «signified upon».

The second anti-communicational paradigm is the *judiciary* one (fig. 5). In this instance the Indian figure is assimilated to the convict awaiting its trial and dreading the sentence of its unsympathetic American judge. In both cases, the photographic scenario is in keeping with the underlying essentialist ideology – both converge towards a statement of incommunicability. A statement that is both a statement *of* culture and *on* culture.



**fig. 4.** Four Horns (Arikara)



**fig. 5.** Apache girl

An easy way to bypass the acknowledgement of one's own deafness to Indians' longing for words is to put it down to their own refusal to speak. The speechless world of photography is meant to put forward what was believed as Indian inarticulateness. In accordance with long-standing racial prejudices, Indians were regarded as *infans*, pre-linguistic or illiterate beings. From this, the responsibility of the White man to speak «for» them, or *in their place*, (notice the renewed relevance and productivity of the spatial metaphor) to re-present them, be it political or visual representation, logically ensues. Curtis's flawed



representation of Indians is a symptom of his fear of the Other. Hence his need to mobilize a whole symbolic apparatus to make up for it.

#### 1.4. The Hegemonic Panoptic Apparatus. The Question of Censorship

Communication can only happen between agents enjoying the inalienable status of person, or that of subject, depending on whether we adopt an ethic or a philosophical approach. In Curtis's anthropometrical portraits the subject is normalised and depersonalised,<sup>7</sup> in other words, he is turned into a *persona* – a generic mask. Differences are levelled down via the reduction to one single homogenised visual proposition. Interestingly, Bhabha (1994: 127) comments on the function and effect of this «epistemological visibility»: «[the colonial] narrative of ambivalent, hybrid, cultural knowledges – neither “one” nor “other” – is ethnocentrically elided in the search for cultural commensurability». In the photograph below (fig. 6), the reduction of the face to its invariants is literalized in the form of the tribal mask, as if it materialised the photographic transformation of the face into an archetypal facies.



fig. 6. Tobadzischini (Navaho)

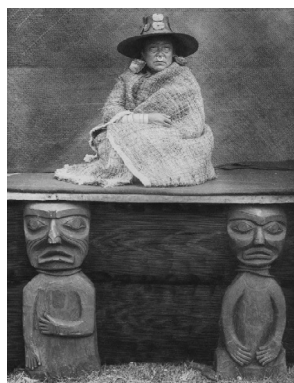
Photography betrays a difficulty to master *the voice* of the Indian and makes up for the failure to communicate by making possible a mapping of Indian *bodies*. The shift in focus from voice to bodies is corroborated by a shift in focus from time to space. As Indians are not recognised as historical subjects inscribed in temporality, they are captured physically in space through the symbolic annexing of bodies, which is signified mimetically by the structural sense of closure of

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7. Depersonalisation is even further reinforced through the reification process which arises from the fact that the photographic object is *functionalised*: it is either instrumentalized as an ethnographic object and informational resource, sold as an aesthetic object, or consumed as a piece of «conspicuous consumption».

the photographs. The communicational dead-end is rendered in the following photograph (fig. 7) through a complex network of imbedded frames that tend to demultiply and therefore to reinforce the actual frame of the picture.

E. S. Curtis fails to dialectize the scopic hierarchy between the observer and the observed and seems instead to polarise it further still, creating an asymmetric relational binarism in which the photographed subject is exposed to a hegemonic, voyeuristic all-seeing *I / eye*. This relational configuration echoes the racial hierarchy of the time. The figure in the photograph is silenced, immobilised and therefore loses his or her capacity to speak in the first person, be it verbally or visually. In the photograph of the chief's daughter (fig. 7), the echo between the immobility of the human figure and that of the inanimate artefact points at a homology in Curtis's treatment of subjects and objects. The strictly knit visual structure is such that it does not allow the photograph to become a site for communication – a site where ingredients of resistance and subversion could potentially emerge – since no «counter-word» (Bakhtin, 1981), one should rather say no «counter-gaze», is possible.



**fig. 7.** Nakoaktok (chief's daughter)



**fig. 8.** Wishham girl (profile)

The view in profile (fig. 8), precluding any eye contact, is the anti-communicational view *par excellence* since it explicitly dramatises and exacerbates the absence of reciprocity inherent to the medium. Such (mis)uses of the photographic medium turn it into a tool of censorship, as if Curtis could check the otherness *of/in* Indians by simply silencing them. It may well be a *subliminal* act of denial rather than a positive act of repression, a way of escaping the intricacies of linguistic exchange by freezing it in the apparently definite form of the image. Photography was probably meant as a way to exorcise the *fin-de-siècle* fear of the elusive and the passing, a means to maintain the illusion of cultural stability in the face of the fast-changing American world. Curtis's yearning for a world of fixed cultural essences can be illustrated by the photograph entitled «Crying to the spirits» (fig. 9). This is an example of how Curtis could suggest ethereal, timeless, immutable «indianness» through the use of geometrical parallel and intersecting lines, anchoring the figure deeply in its cultural ground.



**fig. 9.** Crying to the spirits

The soft-focus effect blurs the vision as much as photography stands in the way of intercultural communication, as if perceptive uncertainty was an objective correlative of the incommunicability between cultures. Here, photography functions both as a symbolic wall that solidifies the institutionalized partition between cultures and as a protective screen that reveals mechanisms and strategies of defence, and conceals the object on which it is supposed to focus.

### **1.5. Communication Degree Zero: Intracultural Consensus**

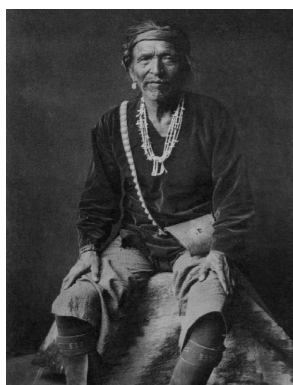
Who chooses the codes? When it comes to intercultural communication we may wonder where «the common ground» of communication lies. In a colonial context, the necessary effort towards reciprocal adjustment between cultures is usually evacuated by the dominant party. In *The North American Indian* indeed

the American eye is also an *Americanizing* eye that uses photographs of Indian subjects as a symbolic surface for national inscription and intracultural enunciation. Indians are absorbed symbolically by being «incorporated» visually (Trachtenberg, 1982) into Western aesthetic or narrative programs.



**fig. 10.** Hopi maiden

«The Hopi maiden» (fig. 10), which could be paralleled with photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron, is an example of how Indian figures are romanticized (not to say gothicized) in the pictorialist manner, and haloed with the glamour that usually radiated from the faces of Hollywood stars on 1920s posters. The Indian portrait is always anglomorphic, falling into either the category of the «Beautiful» or the «Picturesque» according to Western standards of taste inherited from 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, on which are sometimes superimposed contemporary canons of beauty deriving from the new emergent mass society.



**fig. 11.** Hastin Yazhe (Navaho)

In full-length portraits, Indian figures (chiefs or women) are viewed in full dress (fig. 11), with an explicit emphasis on the garment as in the traditional

bourgeois visual apparatus. Indians are stylised and spectacularized in photographs informed by narratives, whether it be scientific, mythological, historical or biblical fictions. They are caught up in alien scenarios – epic, pastoral or Christian – that they are bound to enact in the space of the photography. North American Indians become the symbolic, hyper-rhetorical sites, saturated with white codes, where the signs of «americanity» rather than those of «indianity» are exhibited. In this process of symbolic acculturation, which parallels assimilationist politics in real life, the Other serves as (re)assurance for one's own assumptions, standards and categories. The Other is only registered – as a folkloric figure, a photogenic, aesthetic or informational «resource» – as long as he or she allows self-referentiality. Indians are not *communicated* with, but *converted into* signs to serve as cognitive and rhetorical tools for some *intracultural* communication in which they cannot take part.

Therefore, if communication happens at all, it certainly occurs between E. S. Curtis and his contemporaries. *The North American Indian* was indeed expressly designed for a specifically American readership, as testifies the status of Curtis's patrons and sponsors.<sup>8</sup> It was meant as a book *on* Indians *for* Americans. As such, the imperative of intracultural transparency was a structural and determining factor in the making of *The North American Indian*, and led Curtis to conform to the reading expectations prevailing in that period.

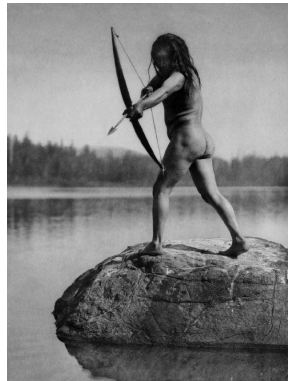


fig. 12. Bowman

The photograph «Bowman» (fig. 12) is, like the prototypical portrait of the feathered Indian chief (fig. 13), an instance of how communication can degenerate

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8. E. S. Curtis enjoyed the patronage of two major American figures: a political leader and an economic tycoon. *The North American Indian* was indeed promoted by the former president, Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote the «Preface» and supported the project till he died in 1909. The other sponsor was the railway magnate, J. Pierpont Morgan, who helped Curtis finance this monumental project.

into hackneyed rhetoric when the photographer relies exclusively on hyper-coded figures and empty clichés. In the wake of his predecessors, E. S. Curtis was inscribed in a filiation of expeditionist photographers, painters, poets, and frontier-men (Berkhoffer, 1979; Pearce, 1965 [1953]) whose work he had to confirm rather than to contradict. As an inheritor and a guardian, Curtis was therefore involved in an enterprise of continuation and consolidation of pre-existing stereotyped representations, rather than their dynamic re-positioning according to his actual ethnographic fieldwork. As a result, there is no fresh rejuvenation of the reading / communicational contract, but its consensual perpetuation.



**fig. 13.** Iron Plume (Ogalala)

Shall we conclude that *intracultural* communication can only be established at the expense of the *intercultural* one, as if cohesion *within* the same culture necessarily meant alienation and estrangement *between* cultures?

## **2. Communicability: the Liminality of Communication**

### **2.1. Intracultural Rhetoric at a Loss for Words**

Fractures undermine this well-wrought intracultural edifice since it soon appears that Curtis's emphasis on intracultural consensus is a fallback position destined to conceal an inability to speak *about* and *to* Indians. What the excess of intracultural references hides therefore is that «white» men are at a loss for words when faced with cultural difference. In that regard, what is interesting is to identify

[...] the hesitancy afflicting the colonialist discourse when it contemplates its discriminated subjects: the *inscrutability* of the Chinese, the *unspeakable* rites of the Indians, the *indescribable* habits of the Hottentots. [...] An undecidability that

turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (Bhabha, 1994: 112)

«Inscrutable, unspeakable, indescribable» elements necessarily escape the control and regulation of intracultural rhetorical strategies aimed at channelling the otherness of Indians by framing the suggestive power of the image. And what this «unsaid» craves to say is the otherness of the Other, which cannot be communicated through traditional logocentric channels.



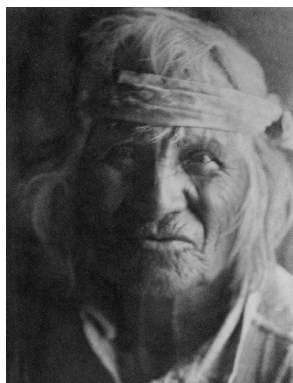
**fig. 14.** Hesquiat woman

In this veiled figure (fig. 14), the mouth is covered in a gesture of decency and an attitude of secrecy. This half-visible face could be interpreted as an incarnation of all the gaps and blanks of communication, reminding what we often tend to overlook, i.e., that silence is part and parcel of communication.

## **2.2. Communication Represented, Communication Experienced?**

Among the countless photographs making up the 20 volumes of the *North American Indian*, some of them contradict the statement of incommunicability and seem to offer some draft preamble to a way out of ethnocentric solipsism. In the portraits, figures in full-face, represented frontally, at eye-level, seem to be staged in a situation of communication, as if *about* to speak (fig. 15). Looking straight into the eyes of their imaginary observer, they are face to face with him, as if they had been frozen right before the moment of interlocution.

Such photographs mimic a situation of mutuality and reciprocity, and in so doing, resort to the illusionist resources of photography, relying on the confusion between what is represented and what is actually experienced – a confusion which was common occurrence in the early days of photography, when its newfound mimetic verisimilitude stimulated the esoteric belief in the reactivity of the figure.



**fig. 15.** A Sia man

### 2.3. The Threshold of Communication

What is staged therefore is not communication as such, but *the threshold* of communication, its imminent advent. In these particular instances, photography recovers its status as a symbolic liminal space, an *inter-site*, an interstice where a *desire* for communication is signified – a desire that emerges in the plastic space of the photographs, but which may also be paralleled with some new desire for communication in the social space. «[...] Liminal spaces, in-between the designations of identity, become the process of symbolic interaction, [...] connective tissue» (Bhabha, 1994: 4).



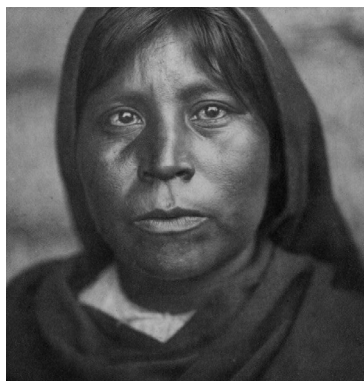
**fig. 16.** Red Star (Arikara)

By staging the incompleteness of a process *about to* happen, on *the brink of* actualization, Curtis renounces his deleterious, nostalgic recreation of fixed essence, allowing the image to recover some of its inherent dynamics. Forms evolve into *forces* when the statement of incommunicability evolves into the nascent



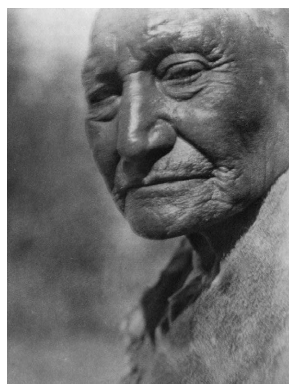
recognition of communicability, that is, a *potential* for communication which is not *de facto* actualized yet. What is staged in these photographs is therefore an *eagerness for* dialogue, a *promise for* communication. (fig. 16)

The pact of a would-be communication is sealed through eye contact (fig. 17). Eye contact is an activation of communication; it is the visual equivalent of phatic strategies, i.e., an elementary contact paving the way for more elaborate and sophisticated forms of communication.



**fig. 17.** Qahatika matron

There is also another phatic ingredient in photographic close-ups, where the figure in the photograph appeals all the more to the observer since it seems to be within the reach of his hand (fig. 18). This symbolic proximity, signified by the haptic modality of vision (some critics called it «the visual sense of touch») also works as the activation of a fictive communicational contract.



**fig. 18.** Aged Paviotso of Pyramid Lake

Eye contact as well as visual proximity are both a form of silent hailing or mute interpellation – a *punctum* (Barthes, 1988: 10) – which seizes, moves or

appeals to the observer, attracting him *towards* the gaze. What Curtis therefore stages is the preamble of communication, which is both a stimulation and an invitation to interact.

## 2.4. Silence as Common Ground

In that instance, silence is no longer a form of regressive and passive rejection of expression, but rather the exacerbation of the desire for communication, the intensification of the longing to approach the Other. As Susan Sontag (1973: 24) points out, silence is provocative: «the very muteness of what is, hypothetically, comprehensible in photographs is what constitutes their attraction and provocativeness».

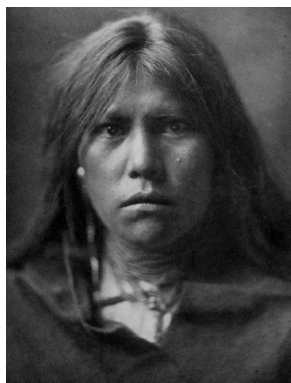


fig. 19. Tenokai (Apache)

The French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson (in Baudrillard, 1968: 16) said once that «you've got to capture people in the midst of their relationship to their own self, that is, in their silence». To that extent, silence is also a common ground insofar as it is shared by the silent observer of the photograph and the figure in it – a kind of silence which sets into motion an intimate, understated form of communication. This is where communication turns into suggestion.

## 2.5. The *Differance* of Communication

This stammering communication can only happen at the level of reception, so that the communicational diad *photographer-model* is completed by a third agency, that of receptors who may, in their own time and place, experience the

*punctum* of otherness in E. S. Curtis's photographs. That third interpretive agency is called the «third place» by Bhabha (1994: 36):

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot «in itself» be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation.

This third place is displaced from the original context of production. That is why one could speak of the «différance» (Derrida, 1976) of communication, both postponed and reiterated, ever different to what it was meant to be in the first place. It is indeed only through an act of imagination that gazes may be reciprocated: this exchange of gaze, this phatic eye-contact, is both *differed* (it happens in some specific context of reception, both displaced in place and time), and it also *differs* (from the prescriptions devised in the first place by the author). From such an interplay, some sort of discontinuous circulation of gazes, as multi-directional and multi-valent as the interpretative process itself, ensues.

One could underline the very «patience» of the photograph, which, in its very material durability, allows the event of difference and the advent of *differance*. This idea of *differance* is close to what Bhabha (1994: 191) calls the «time-lag», which is an interruptive but also interpretive locus:

the process of reinscription and negotiation – the insertion or intervention of something that takes on new meaning – happens in the temporal break in-between the sign [...] Through this time-lag – the temporal break in representation – emerges the process of agency both as a historical development and the narrative agency of historical discourse.

Thanks to this time-lag, there is a displacement from symbol (statements *of* and *on* culture) to signs, which recover their suggestive and interpretative potential, as if visual idioms were born anew.

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha, 1994: 37)

It is in this differed and different act of interpretation, which is also an act of imagination, that photography fully deploys its evocative resources *a posteriori*.

## 2.6. «The Third Place» of Communication

It is significant that Homi Bhabha should choose the phrase «the third place», resorting as we did throughout this article to the heuristic resources of the spatial metaphor. To contemplate communication in terms of spatiality is in keeping with our idea of photography as a dynamic locus of collaboration and articulation where a third agency is able to intervene. In the differed and differing process of interpretation, photography becomes a crossroads, the meeting point of various agencies – a border which is no longer to be construed as a wall that separates but as a bridge that relates and connects, in accordance with Martin Heidegger's (1971: 152-153) definition: «always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks [...] The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses».

Curtis unwittingly becomes a ferryman, passing on symbols that will in turn be re-appropriated as signs and invested differently. We could therefore define interpretation as «the unconscious of communication», which provides a way out of the implacable statement of intercultural incommunicability.



fig. 20. Hwalya-Yuma

## 3. Conclusions: The Poetics and Politics of Communication

### 3.1. The *Aporia* of Communication

What E. S. Curtis presents us with in his photographic portraits is not so much a statement of incommunicability as the suspension of communication in the form of photographic *aporias*. There is no such thing indeed as absolutely transparent communication, since there is always something incommensurable in and about the Other, especially in the intercultural context. Communication becomes a relational trial where ingredients of uncertainty and antagonism

necessarily persist. It is as if the impenetrability *of* the photograph (at the level of the representation) and that of the individual face *in* the photograph (at the level of the represented) materialized all the unsaid, the blanks, the lacunae, the understatements which are bound to occur in the communicational process and which constitute major – and dynamic – components of it. And if, confronted to the photo, we are at a loss for words, it means that explication ends where comprehension starts, when the Other can externalize his or her «inwardness» – an expressivity which does not necessarily rely on actual, overt communication. Like the amputated tongue of Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,<sup>9</sup> the words of the Other may well have been maimed, but they resist and persist in some oblique form of expression.

### 3.2. From Communication to Expression

I would like thus to end on the evocation of smiles. Photographs of smiling individuals are the suggestion of communication, the refraction in the photograph of some conversation that was started prior to the taking of the photograph. Smiles are expressive and eloquent: the smile on the face of the photographed figure is a sort of communication without a meaning, silent eloquence, that of the irreducible individuality of the Other, testified by the incommensurability of his or her smiling face. (fig. 21)



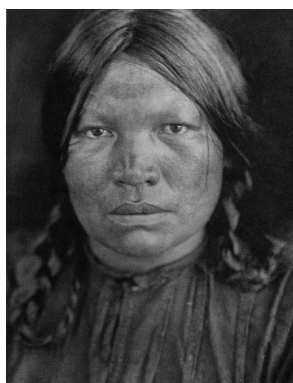
fig. 21. Okuwa-tsire (Cloud Bird)

The smile is visually performative (more than pedagogic). It is a «*face-act*» – to paraphrase and translate J. L. Austin's concept of «*speech-act*» into the

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9. Philomela's tongue was chopped off after she was raped by her brother in law. As she could no longer speak but still wanted to warn her sister against the villainy of her husband, she started to weave her words in the form of a tapestry and succeeded in sending it to her sister Procne (Book IV).

realm of the visual – which is both ideologically *effective* and psychologically *affective*. Intercultural communication is not reducible to a mere epistemic investigation of the Other (*to know*) and cannot even be limited to the hermeneutic approach (*to understand*), nor to the mystique quest (*to confuse*), of the Other. Thanks to the mediation of the image, we are made aware of the irreducibility of otherness, while at the same time being made alive – or «sensitized» to resort to a photographic metaphor – to the expression of the anonymous Other.



**fig. 22.** A Chipewyan woman

In the late 1890s, when the frontier was closed (Turner, 1993: 88), the West ceased to be a ground for conquest and it became a contact zone. Photography, as an art of contact – and of ambiguity – exemplifies the cultural moment when this *passage* from conflict to communication between cultures was initiated.

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