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Propriété intellectuelle
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‘While primarily a photographer, I do not see or think photographically. Hence the story of Indian life will not be told in microscopic detail, but rather will be presented as a broad and luminous picture.’ Edward S. Curtis*

1 Between 1896 and 1930 Edward Sheriff Curtis photographed some eighty Native American peoples, and then published 2,228 photoengravings in his monumental twenty-volume encyclopedia The North American Indian (1907–30), an unclassifiable blend of elaborately worked images and thousands of pages of ethnographic text. Initially known for his portraits of the local Seattle middle classes, Curtis created his enormous pictorialist saga in the context of the federal government’s assimilationist policies.1 Ignoring the detribalization policy in his photographs, he strove to conceal all signs of deculturation, his aim being a ‘rediscovery’ of the ‘pre-contact Indian,’ an exotic, supposedly preindustrial and premodern being – and one largely the product of fantasy. This explains the extremely structured and sometimes excessively orchestrated character of his images, which are permeated by a powerful imaginative vision. His numerous strategies in terms of pose, mise en scène, and use of props situate Curtis among the practitioners of ‘mixed,’ ‘creative,’ and ‘interventionist’ techniques.

2 Paradoxically, though, and in spite of the project’s inherent – and undisguised – element of fabrication, Curtis’s work seems to have been consistently assessed according to its degree of accuracy. As a result, between 1910 and 1990 its critical trajectory hinged entirely on the true-or-false divide, oscillating between naive idealization and vitriolic condemnation, between a sometimes abysmal ‘credulity’2 (the ‘idolatrous’ interpretation) and a sometimes paranoid obsession with the false (the ‘iconophobic’ standpoint).

3 Because Curtis’s photographic project was above all a creative one, in which structuring clearly outweighs actual recording, it seems to me that neither of these two approaches

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has produced a convincing account of the specific cultural, symbolic, and identity issues raised by his images. And so, having analyzed Curtis’s complicated relationship with the truth, I shall propose a historiographic overview singling out a number of phases: a modernist phase of marginalization; a popular one of iconization; a revisionist one of denunciation; a postcolonial one of appropriation; and lastly what I shall call a post-revisionist phase, with which I would like to associate myself. Thus my aim in this text will be to break out of the true/false dichotomy and suggest a new heuristics capable of tackling the unexplored aspects of Curtis’s work.

Pictorialist Cosmetics: Inaccuracy in the Name of Truth

Rather than compiling an inventory of Curtis’s obvious special effects, I have opted to rehistoricize his strategies so as to make sense of a paradox central to his work: a taste for artifice, justified by a quest for truth, situated at the point where art and science coincide. This fundamental ambivalence is doubtless the source of all subsequent reactions to his photoengravings, which at certain times have been accepted as fully authentic or, at others, condemned as an enormous fraud. The question will then be to understand how they have laid themselves open to such contradictory critical positionings.

In accordance with pictorialist conventions, Curtis applied studio-photography procedures to in situ scenes and portraits for specifically scenic and theatrical purposes. Before taking his picture, he adjusted or ‘artified’ reality with the skilful use of poses, lighting, and props. Then, he would sometimes alter the negative or print via cropping, retouching, and printing techniques (such as burning), which involved the use of special inks and papers. He removed certain details from the negative by scratching or abrasion, and in some cases redrew parts of the print using a brush, a stump, or a finger. The primary aim of all these measures was to reveal the ‘true Indian’:

‘None of these pictures would admit anything which betokened civilization, whether in an article of dress or landscape or objects on the ground. These pictures were to be transcriptions for future generations that they might behold the Indian as nearly lifelike as possible as he moved about before he ever saw a paleface or knew there was anything human or in nature other than what he himself had seen.’

Nonetheless, whatever truth the images may contain lies less in some sort of cultural purity, photographic authenticity, or ethnological veracity than in how they conform to the ‘image models’ and canonical motifs of the primitivist imaginary. Thus Curtis’s stagings are based on the imitation of a certain déjà vu and the expectations of the public of his time. In his portrait of Weasel Tail, for example, he attempts – by means of a kind of dress-up – to create an image that reflects those produced in the nineteenth century by painters like Karl Bodmer, Charles Bird King, Charles Eastman, and George Catlin, or by the photographers who accompanied major exploration expeditions.

From the outset, Curtis’s pursuit of truth took the form of a conscious act of fabrication and, paradoxically, of images that were flagrantly tampered with. Yet the fact remains that these strayings from reality were, as he saw it, undertaken in the interest of fidelity to the underlying ‘idea.’ For the pictorialists, literal accuracy and strictly factual, mechanical recording were seen not as purveyors of truth, but rather as vulgar and
prosaic obstacles to it: accuracy had already been tried and found guilty by Delacroix and Baudelaire, as well as by all the representatives of photographic idealism. And so to counter the medium's 'indexicality' and mechanicalness was to strive toward a photographic truth entirely predicated on construction, artifice, and borrowings from the fine arts. The photographer's art thus consisted in not being a photographer:

'This Mr. Edward Curtis of Seattle is more than a photographer, in the ordinary sense of the word. He is an artist, and a great one, doing with his camera far more than Remington has done with his pen, or that wonderful, if crude, genius, Russell, has accomplished with his brush. For even greater than master of oils or watercolor or crayon is this Curtis.'

Theodore Roosevelt, Curtis's prestigious patron, was no less fulsome in his preface to The North American Indian: 'In Mr. Curtis we have both an artist and a trained observer, whose pictures are pictures, not merely photographs; whose work has far more than mere accuracy, because it is truthful.'

In these photographic romances, the liberties Curtis takes with truth are always justified by his quest for a supposedly higher truth: a non-optical, non-empirical truth, aimed at capturing the spirit beneath the mere outward appearance of his Indigenous subjects. This 'spirit of the depths' reflects an esoteric conception of the medium that was very much in vogue at the turn of the century, and not far removed from the lyrically 'scientific' mystique still prevalent in certain intellectual circles whose approval Curtis was actively seeking.

Curtis stands out among pictorialist photographers in his intention to base the validity of his images on two 'systems of truth,' that of artistic idealism on the one hand and of Victorian scientism on the other. This dual allegiance led him to ally ethnographic observation with pictorialist interpretation and the aura of art with the authority of science. It must be said, however, that in the early twentieth century reconstruction and scenographic manipulation in the photographic field were still often considered valid ethnographic strategies by museums and the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE); accordingly, Curtis's near-theatrical devices were seen as acts of cultural 'purification' and justified by a moral discourse of preservation or an essentialist one of purity.

In this respect it was not at all uncommon for Curtis to bestow a scientific tone on some of his portraits – even the most allegorical of them – by resorting to a face/profile arrangement inspired by anthropometrics. This involved applying the rhetorical codes of genericity – frontal view, rigid pose, centripetal organization, static framing, and decontextualization – demanded by a quest for physical invariance and epistemic stability. Such photographic signposting was sometimes backed up textually: in the tradition of natural history typology, the captions provided the subject's name, sex, and tribal affiliation in a taxonomic strategy evocative of the imposing architecture of the encyclopedia itself.

Imbued with moral absolutes, innatist and determinist beliefs and a highly one-dimensional notion of culture, Curtis was a thoroughgoing disciple of Victorian anthropology and its assumptions. Nonetheless, in an age when knowledge and methodologies were becoming increasingly specialized and anthropology, both as social science and métier, was acquiring an academic and professional identity, centred on Franz Boas and Columbia University, he embodied a preprofessional vein that brought him a growing reputation as an 'inspired amateur.' Although his work drew criticism from Boas and his circle, Curtis sought to establish his credentials via the political
backing of President Theodore Roosevelt\textsuperscript{14} and the intellectual support of the Smithsonian Institution’s Frederick Webb Hodge, a member of the BAE. An expert on American-Indian matters,\textsuperscript{15} Hodge copyedited Curtis’s work, thus helping to ensure the favourable reception it received from such BAE scholars as G.B. Gordon in \textit{The American Anthropologist}, of which Hodge was also the editor in chief: ‘There has never been a series of pictures from brush or camera which so artistically and at the same time so accurately illustrates the life of the Indian tribes, ... or which portrays so truthfully the physical types characteristic of these tribes.’\textsuperscript{16}

‘Artistically ... accurately ... truthfully’: such lexical slippage is without doubt the clearest symptom of conceptual wavering – and of a notion of photographic truth based as much on the beautiful, the good, and the useful as on nature, at a time when forms of truth and the accompanying discourse were changing radically in the world of art as well as of anthropology. In his general introduction to \textit{The North American Indian}, Curtis does not hesitate to evoke the rhetoric of a natural, not to say an autograph art:

\textit{‘Being directly from Nature}, the accompanying pictures show what actually exists or has recently existed (for many of the subjects have already passed forever), not what the artist in his studio may presume the Indian and his surroundings to be. ... The word-story of this primitive life, like the pictures, must be drawn direct from Nature. Nature tells the story, and in Nature’s simple words I can but place it before the reader.’\textsuperscript{17}

Where the painter George Catlin put his personal honour on the line in ‘certificates to authenticity,’ Curtis pursued a similar evidential logic by invoking the natural authority of the photographic rendering.

It seems surprising, then, that the ethnological veracity Curtis was later accused of being so careless with should be the main virtue attributed to his work by the critic Sadakichi Hartmann: ‘I believe it is safe to say that [Curtis’s] work will satisfy all expectations as far as truth is concerned. It will give a truthful record of the Indian race, and as an ethnological document will be invaluable.’\textsuperscript{18} Hartmann’s commentary is emblematic of Curtis’s ambiguous status both in an increasingly elitist photographic milieu and an ever more organized anthropological one. Torn between dismissal and admiration, Hartmann deplores Curtis’s success with the media and the public, finds his ‘Indian’ subject matter too prosaic and considers the excess of ‘accuracy’ detrimental to the artistic value of his photographs, while at the same time criticizing the images as too dark: ‘The majority of his pictures I have seen were all a trifle muddy.’

And so, censured by artistic and scientific circles for, respectively, too much and too little accuracy, Curtis’s ‘pictorialist anthropology’ soon found itself discredited, at a time when the ground rules of truth were changing quickly. In its mix of acceptance and rejection, this contemporary reception foreshadowed the ongoing difficulty in assigning Curtis a stable position within the discipline and contained the seeds of the critical reactions to come.

**Historiographic Overview: Truth as the Yardstick**

While it is now accepted that Curtis’s emendations were not intended to deceive the viewer, reception of his images went through very different, not to say contradictory, phases in the course of a singular and discontinuous trajectory: applauded in the 1910s, they were neglected in the 1920s, literally forgotten between 1930 and 1960, showered
with praise in the 1970s, repudiated in the 1980s and ultimately collected and widely exhibited from the 1990s onward. The ever-changing nature of this critical path highlights the variability and the tenuousness of the various discourses on truth, while at the same time underscoring the need to cut free of dogma and develop a new heuristics.

During the rise of ‘straight photography’ in the interwar years, it is hardly surprising that Curtis’s highly interventionist methods fell out of favour in New York circles where, in an ambience of growing uniformity, they were considered either obsolete or ‘unphotographic.’ Pictorialism’s hybrid, inter-iconic practices seemed at the time like a retrograde movement, overly indebted to Europe, beaux-arts aesthetics, and literary and painterly traditions. With clarity, sharp focus, and impersonality rapidly becoming the norms, a major change took place in the photographic notion of truth, which now demanded a desubjectivizing of the medium that went directly counter to Curtis’s overt workmanship, with its extensive use of ‘mixed processes.’ The polar opposite of pictorialist credo – now the perfect foil for documentary orthodoxy – this new ‘aesthetics of transparency’ was reinforced by the formal and technical absolutes of a modernism in which the quest for truth was replaced by a mystique of purity and an ontological and teleological vision of art media generally. We could say, then, that the modernist reception accorded to Curtis consisted in a way of a non-reception: marginalized by the Stieglitz-led avant-garde, he also suffered long-term exclusion at the hands of historians, notably the ultraformalist Beaumont Newhall.

Just as the modernist dogma of purity meant lasting banishment from the photographic canon for The North American Indian, the documentary/artistic dichotomy prevailing on the museum scene could not accommodate a body of work created prior to this split and rooted in a rhetorical encounter between the two opposing categories. Moreover, Curtis’s ventures into mimesis also excluded him from the contemporary debate around the Peircean nomenclature of signs, whose hypertheorization of the medium and rigid methodology proved inapplicable to his photogravures and to pictorialism in general.

Despite the difficulty of addressing such a frankly ideological oeuvre from a strictly aesthetic point of view – not to mention the concomitant danger of glamorizing it – some art historians have still attempted a formalist or iconocentric reading that analyzes the technical and stylistic dimensions of Curtis’s pictorialism and thereby siphons off the cultural issues into strictly formal considerations. These studies attempt a depopularization of a vernacular corpus traditionally regarded as minor, the intention being to integrate Curtis into the aesthetic field of modernism, when what would seem more pertinent is a place in the cultural field of modernity.

After a long spell in oblivion beginning in 1935, Curtis’s photos resurfaced in 1971 in two exhibitions – the first to be devoted exclusively to him since his death in 1952 – at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the Museum of Art in Philadelphia. These ushered in the ‘Curtis revival’ or the ‘Curtis renaissance’ and a long series of further exhibitions, numerous publications, and glossy monographs. In the context of the civil rights movement, Curtis’s photographs were acclaimed as the last direct testimony to Indigenous People of the Americas (as in books like Touch the Earth, 1971), and, as such, were regularly used as primary sources for magazine articles and television documentaries. This is what I would term the ‘credulous’ or ‘idolatrous’ approach, which ignores Curtis’s pictorialist tamperings and accepts too readily the content of his pictures, confusing image with referent. This phase of image-consumption and blind
idealization would help to enshrine *The North American Indian* as an enduring popular media object, but at the same time mark it as an intellectually insignificant artifact.

Posthumously propelled to centre stage by the revival of Native culture in the 1970s, Curtis was now being presented as a defender of Native rights and even an icon of resistance and a counterculture hero. These adulatory interpretations were reinforced by the highly biographical – not to say frankly romanticized – emphasis of most of the writing about him since the 1970s, which largely focused media attention on the photographer himself.  

This popular infatuation went hand in hand with an attempt to boost the prestige of Curtis’s photographs, but in terms of *value* rather than meaning. Their symbolic popular-culture value – expressed in cheap, mass-produced spin-offs and the sale of original prints at exorbitant prices – was consolidated by the heritage value his work acquired when, at the initiative of collector Christopher Cardozo, a series of travelling exhibitions titled *Sacred Legacy* was organized abroad. Confusedly put forward as both artworks and artifacts of a civilization, in Europe and Asia the images were presented as a national heritage in the form of an homage to the American Indian, notably in Scott Momaday’s preface to the catalogue: ‘The definitive collection of Curtis’s photographs is an American treasure. ... They are validations of an important and unique moment in the evolution of an American identity. The moment is forever ours, and it is indeed a sacred legacy.’ This hagiographic interpretation, with its language of sacredness and edification, revives the rhetoric used by Curtis himself in the 1900s, neutralizing the work’s cultural coordinates to better elevate it to mythical status.

The media onslaught, however, served only to increase the animosity of academics, who saw the popular success of the images as a sign of their inadmissibility as an intellectually serious subject. Consequently the attention Curtis finally began attracting from scholars in the 1980s was strictly negative.

In the early 1980s, a fairly typical backswing of the pendulum saw the ‘credulity’ mentioned above all, victim to the demystifying iconoclasm of a revisionist critique that denounced Curtis’s pictures as deceptive manipulations and his *mises en scène* as products not of inventiveness, but of misguided meddling. Ultimately, it was at the point where the history of the American West intersected with First Peoples nationalism that *The North American Indian* received its first serious scrutiny from academia. These reinterpretations appeared in the context of an iconophobic sensibility, rooted in the concepts of spectacle and simulacrum and the writings of Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno (as well as Susan Sontag, Jean Baudrillard, and Paul Virilio) and wedded to a negative ontology of an image now seen as cheating, lying, and dissimulating.

Many were the critics who, like Gerald Vizenor, James C. Faris, and Peter Jackson, homed in on the ‘falseness’ of Curtis’s pictures. It was, however, the Smithsonian Institution that really set demystification in motion with a Curtis exhibition titled *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions*. Christopher Lyman’s catalogue provides one of the first academic assessments of Curtis, but regrettably settles for condemning his primitivist imaginary rather than exploring its sources and foundations and the identity, political, and cultural issues it raises. Instead of looking into the oeuvre’s flagrantly structural ambivalences, Lyman devotes his energies merely to listing its inaccuracies.

While the iconoclasm of the 1980s certainly provided a salutary counterpoint to the hero-worship of the preceding decades and contributed to a much-needed revision of the myth...
of the American West, it also played its part in stigmatizing the degree of creativity inherent in the photographic act. On the one hand, this iconoclastic stance and the underlying objectivist conception of photography had the effect of fetishizing the medium and restricting its value to the mere recording of appearances: style and subjectivity were seen merely as betrayals of a supposedly pure a-photographic or pre-photographic Indigenous truth, which photography can only distort or falsify. On the other hand, this heuristics of suspicion conveyed an essentialist vision of the ‘Indian’ world (ultimately not unlike that of Curtis himself) and did not take into account the way play, imaginative structuring, and the phenomena of cultural transaction intervene in the photographic image. Thus the effect of the moral and normative issue of truth and falsehood has been to relegate American Indigenous cultures to a world of ethnohistory, continuing to draw on reified – and reifying – concepts of authenticity, truth, and purity and the frequent equating of cultural purity with photographic veracity.

It could also be said that the ‘trial’ of Edward S. Curtis was symptomatic of a tension within the humanities and social sciences regarding subjectivity, with a particular concern for anthropology, faced as it was with the advent of poststructuralism. Field reporting and photographic documentation were also being shaken by ‘a grave crisis of confidence,’ but what bothered critics and scholars most about Curtis’s work was surely the combination of an expressive use of photography with a projective, interpretative practice of ethnography – not to mention his unabashed assertion of authorial control and of the role accorded to affect and imagination. In their attack on his pseudo-ethnographic strategies the intellectuals were, so to speak, settling their accounts with truth and trying to assess the admissibility of their own stance.

Until the early 1990s, truth, purity, and accuracy remained the yardstick for photographic value, to the point where the reception given to *The North American Indian* was shaped by frequently partisan debates and polemics, for and against. Never had idolatry and iconoclasm come so intensely together around a single issue. Yet while the two approaches may appear contradictory, they are in fact the two faces of the same literalism: for each, the sole touchstone for photography remains its faithfulness to the referent, regardless of what photography as such makes or produces.

**Beyond Truth and Falsehood? Toward a ‘Post-Revisionist’ Heuristics**

The postcolonial ‘moment’ launched a new era in the reception of the Curtis oeuvre by offering a way out of the true/false stalemate and rehabilitating the specifically positive and productive aspect of photographic interventionism. The 1992 book *Partial Recall* offers a good illustration of the paradigm shift that enabled such intrusion to be seen no longer as falsification, but as invention and bricolage: collaboration and transaction could be considered core operations in both the creation of cultural identity and the production of the photographic image, now that the process was understood as dialogical or transactional, rather than strictly hegemonic. There was less talk of manipulation than of construction, of control than of participation, the upshot being a displacement of the fetishistic interest in ethnic – or photographic – purity toward fundamentally theatrical situations of play or hybridization.
Appropriation of Curtis’s work by today’s Indigenous photographers and visual artists takes the form of subversion of his pictures in which an (often humorous) play on modes of identification and the concept of the ‘fake’ sabotages the notion of authenticity that was so long the target of earlier analyses. In practical terms this appropriation involves systems of montage, collage, and overlay, for example by Jane Ash Poitras and Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie; the use of sepia, as by Carm Little Turtle; quotation and parody, by Marcus Amerman; and juxtapositions and interlocking references, by Victor Masayesva and the Iroquois photographer Jeff Thomas. No longer interested in authenticating the truth or an authorized version of it, Thomas seeks a place in a potentially endless chain of copies. His goal is not to ‘reestablish a lost truth’ or even to ‘correct’ Curtis’s images, but to revitalize the issues they raise.

Accordingly, if we are to break free of the ontological vision of Curtis’s photographs and the fetishistic status of icon or evidence sometimes attributed to them, we must turn to the work of contemporary Indigenous artists. In this new context the pictures are seen less for what they are than for what they do. This allows us to rethink photography in a more dynamic way, as a strategy drawing its meaning – and not its truth – from the codes it makes and unmakes and the scenarios it actualizes at the interface between the social and symbolic worlds. As a workshop for identity-making and visual codes, photography is not solely a force field; it is also a crucial form of mediation for the negotiating of identity and the imaginary, of memory and history. The work of these artists invites us to give up trying to define photography’s ‘being,’ and to think instead about its ‘doing’: about the worlds it constructs, the codes and images it carries, the symbolic issues it brings back to the fore, and the social functions it serves.

As postcolonial criticism has already suggested, the Curtis oeuvre demands that we abandon any strictly academic or discipline-based rationale, any restrictive modelling, and look to transversal rather than rigorously sectorial approaches. In the context of the critical revival begun by New Western History, New Art History, and a contextualist and social history of photography, fresh approaches to Curtis have appeared that reject previous qualifying judgments in favour of a historicizing or culturalist point of view. Among the proponents of the latter are the photographic historian Martha Sandweiss and the historian of the American West William N. Goetzmann, as well as Shannon Egan, whose excellent doctoral thesis, supervised by William Truettner, was completed in 2006.

These few works aside, it would seem that the Curtis oeuvre has been most effectively tackled in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. In 1998, Mick Gidley, a professor at Leeds University and a specialist in American literature and culture, provided a wide-ranging study in his masterly *The North American Indian, Incorporated*. Bringing a rigorously contextual approach to bear on a vast quantity of hitherto unexplored archival material, he assesses *The North American Indian* as a business venture, investigating the institutional, commercial, and organizational factors governing the creation of its images.

Where Gidley casts light on the immediate context in which Curtis produced his work, Alan Trachtenberg opts for a dialogue between the project and its broader contexts in ‘Ghostlier Demarcation,’ a brief but rewarding chapter in a book he published in 2004. Setting the history of photography aside, he addresses *The North American Indian* from a more markedly cultural angle, highlighting the symbolic and identity-making factors at work in Curtis’s primitivist imaginary.
What emerges in the most recent studies, then, is a concern with recontextualizing Curtis’s pictures in their original publishing environment: that of a semanticizing book-as-object. Even so, although *The North American Indian* has already been examined as oeuvre, text, and project, there still remains, in my view, a need to explore it as a system at once editorial, symbolic, rhetorical, identity-making, and ideological; and to do so through a global, noncompartmentalized examination of its pragmatics, politics, epistemology, and poetics, for it is in their often contradictory synergy that the images take on meaning. The Curtis oeuvre thus obliges us to mark out an intermediate territory, one offering a grasp of its discontinuities at the point where political history, the history of the West, and of nationalism converge with the history of ideas, representations, and knowledge.

Perhaps one of the most damaging effects of the true/false polemic and the fetishizing of the referent over recent decades has been to inhibit the current generation of critics in their dealings with Curtis’s images while obscuring the iconographic and visual character of his project by refocusing too exclusively on its sociomaterial context. Post-revisionist criticism has indeed opened up new horizons of receptivity to *The North American Indian*, but we often sense a difficulty in addressing the photographs as images, and a reticence with regard to their specific formal and rhetorical coordinates.

This is why it seems to me important, in the wake of Alexander Nemerov and Robin Kelsey,36 to encourage a return to the images themselves and so take up the challenge of a hermeneutics with its roots in sound contextualization and rehistoricization. The goal, then, would be less to describe the forms in or for themselves than to relate the images to their material, symbolic, and social modes of existence, and to have them dialogue with their iconic and discursive environment – both contemporary and past – in a way that casts light on the many phenomena of inter-iconicity that come into play.

By skirting the pitfalls of excessively deterministic materialism, self-sufficient formalism, and inspired phenomenology, this gambit would mean transcending the split between social history and the history of forms, and reconciling the French tradition of aesthetics with American schools of social thought.37 An appropriate framework would be an anthropology of the image and the imaginary, enabling active reciprocation between the political and social economy of the photographic sign and its imaginative poetic economy.

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NOTES

1. The assimilationist era is generally considered to have begun in 1871 with the passing of the Indian Appropriation Act, which terminated the policy of treaties with the Indians and put an end to their status as sovereign nations. The assimilationist strategy was reinforced by the Dawes Act of 1887 and only ended with the abrogation of that act in 1934.
3. The retouching was often carried out in the studio by his partner Adolph Muhr, following Curtis’s instructions on the cyanotype. Curtis achieved soft-focus effects, but without the use of special lenses.
6. Ibid., 212.
7. While mainly features of Plains Indian cultures, certain objects – beads, feathers, leather and skins, moccasins, tepees, and tomahawks – were used as emblems of ‘Indianness’ in general: see John C. Ewers, ‘The Emergence of the Plains Indians as the Symbol of the North American Indian,’ Smithsonian Report, 1964, 531–44.
10. A. Rouillé, La Photographie (note 9), 105.
11. Ibid.
13. John Wesley Powell had laid the foundations for an institutionalization of anthropology when he set up his Bureau of Ethnology in 1879, but it was Franz Boas who refashioned its intellectual paradigms at Columbia University. As the concept of culture took shape, Boas’s anthropology broke with scientific racism and, gradually, with the natural science model. One result was that The North American Indian found itself faced with a specialist world increasingly divided between Washington scientists – whose ethnology was subject to governmental and museum influences – and New York academics. The debate the book gave rise to in the period 1907–14 speaks volumes about this growing polarization within the scientific/scholarly world and the impassioned character of the transition between these two generations.
14. Curtis also benefited from the authority of his various patrons and eminent subscribers, notably railroad magnate J.P. Morgan.
15. Frederick Webb Hodge also edited the very first Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico in 1907–10. American Indian is a term currently used in the United States; in Canada the term Aboriginal or First Nations is used instead.
19. As early as 1899, Stieglitz had applied the term to the gum bichromate process. See Alan Trachtenberg, ed., Classic Essays on Photography (New Haven: Leet’s Island Books, 1980), 121.
20. A. Rouillé, La Photographie (note 9), 345.


23. We owe both these terms to A.D. COLEMAN in, respectively, Portraits from North American Indian Life by Edward Curtis (New York: Outerbridge and Lazard, 1972), v–vi; and Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media and Lens Culture (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1998), 134.


29. A. ROUILLÉ, La Photographie (note 5), 495.


32. A. ROUILLÉ, La Photographie (note 5), 517.


ABSTRACTS

During the period 1907–1930, the American pictorialist Edward S. Curtis photographed some eighty American Indigenous peoples for the 2,200-plus photogravures published in his twenty-volume encyclopedia The North American Indian. From the appearance of the first volumes until the 1990s, the Curtis oeuvre experienced a scientific, artistic, academic, and popular reception that was polarized by a true/false dichotomy concerning the nature of its content. Inevitably the issue of veracity also permeated the various discourses on the corpus, which oscillated between sometimes abysmal credulity (the idolatrous stance) and a near-paranoid obsession with tracking down the false (the revisionist approach and the iconophobic stance). But why has a so blatantly falsified body of photographs so often been assessed in terms of its reality quotient? After proposing a panorama of the critical trajectory of The North American Indian followed by a historiographic overview, this article sets out to break free of the true/false straitjacket by suggesting a new heuristics bearing on the hitherto unexplored aspects of the Curtis oeuvre.

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