

## **Communication and Images of the Body in Huichol<sup>1</sup> Photographs**

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While the visual mass media, television, cinema, photography, and the Internet, have all been studied individually, there is also a need currently to analyze the production of images from the point of view of the actual subjects themselves. The desire to explore today's forms of visual communication in an era where electronic and mechanical images dominate, took me to the Sierra Madre Occidental (Western Sierra Madre) in search of subjects, who, unlike those of us who belong to what is commonly referred to as the Western World, have not had intense contact with photographic, televised or cinema images.

This paper presents an analysis of 2,700 photographs taken by young indigenous people belonging to a tradition of oral culture, a people almost completely isolated from the visual media. This provided an increasingly more rare opportunity to discover what is actually seen by the eye of subjects who live far removed from the images generated by visual technology. Using photography as the means, this study attempts to show what pertains to the technology itself, in this case, what is photographable with a camera, as opposed to what belongs more properly to the realm of what is seen by the Huichol eye, in other words, what is considered photograph-worthy from the point of view of the photographer.

Certain properties inherent in a photographic camera impose themselves on the actual taking of photographs as technology. I wanted to demonstrate, on the one hand, the characteristics of what is specifically photographic, the impact of which was observed even among the Huicholes, despite the fact that they are a community unaware of the established codification of the camera, and unaware of Western images in general. On the other hand, it is also clear that each photograph is also illustrative of a choice made by the actual photographer.

What is it that is seen by the eye of a community that has no access to media images? What do they look at, and how, when using a camera? What is the relationship between what is perceived in the Huichol gaze, the universe that surrounds it, and photographic technology? These are just a few of the questions that came to mind, when watching these young Huicholes taking photographs of their own community for the very first time.

### **Theoretical Background**

Human beings communicate with the world through their senses. Technological means of communication alter the senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch. Such is the opinion of McLuhan (1969), for whom dis-equilibrium of the senses is what constitutes modern man. Leaving to one side the criticisms of McLuhan's work, criticisms occasioned by the historical and political decontextualization with which he approaches technology and its contents, and despite his hasty conclusions, I would, nevertheless, like to keep in mind here his reflection on means of communication and the transformation of the senses. I feel that McLuhan's ideas should be reconsidered in the light of disciplines such as ethnology, sociology and semiotics. This, in my opinion, would lead to a better understanding, not only of the technological specificities of the mass media, but also of the ways in which McLuhan's ideas relate to given contexts, and mark the different communicative competences and practices of individual subjects.

Approaching the theme of what is noticed by the Huichol eye by studying the photographs they took, obliges us to acknowledge that various communicative forms already influence these subjects. Given that, in common with other languages, Huichol writing has only existed for 15 years<sup>2</sup>, and that schools teaching reading and writing in Spanish (Mexico's official language) have not yet reached the whole population, it should be remembered that the written form of communication is not common practice for the Huicholes, even though it is highly valued. Lineal order, the fixed point, distance, the separation between producer and text, and between text and reader, all features of the written form, are barely known in the Huichol world.

Spoken communication, on the other hand, which has characterized this community for many centuries, adheres to other forms of register, relationship and corporal discipline. In comparison to the written register, which organizes content according to theme and is constructed with the minimum of repetition, Memory is the place where spoken communication is registered, using other strategies: repetition, narrative, rhythmic syntax, singing, and didacticism. In the extreme, what makes an impact on forms of communication is "the type of thoughts (that can actually) be thought, and those that cannot be thought" (Havelock, 1963:134).

Our Western culture today, in common with the Huichol culture, is undoubtedly made up of intersections between oral and written communication, and the communication form that is represented as images. That said, I have based this study on the assumption that Huichol communication is mainly oral, given that writing and, most of all, the mass media are rare in their everyday life.

### **San Miguel Huaixtita, the Context**

Research for this study was carried out among the students and teachers of the Tatusi Maxakwaxi (“Our Grandfather Deer Tail”) secondary school, in the village of San Miguel Huaixtita, which lies in the northern part of the State of Jalisco, in the Sierra Madre Occidental, with 710 Huichol Indians inhabitants.

As there are no roads, the journey to San Miguel Huaixtita, in the heart of the Sierra Huichol, begins with an early-morning bus trip, from Guadalajara to Ixtlán del Río, in Nayarit. Prospective travelers must arrive at the airstrip before 6 a.m., in order to “check in and be weighed.” This is an important consideration when one remembers that the planes are small, carrying 3 to 6 passengers, and that passengers necessarily travel carrying food and all other requirements for their work in the Sierra. The plane takes off as soon as the sky lightens, and the flight timetable for the day depends on demand and the destinations requested. *Mestizos*<sup>3</sup> and Huicholes, as well as one or two teachers, social activists or government employees, all wait their turn. The flight to San Miguel frequently does not leave until after midday, or may even be postponed altogether, due to bad weather or other reasons, and this makes travel into and back from the Sierra somewhat unpredictable. This difficulty of access is the first obstacle preventing contact with Western images; newspapers, magazines and books only arrive sporadically. Another factor is the absence of electricity, which inevitably affects the operation of any communication technology, such as the television or cinema. However, battery-operated radio-receivers are not unknown.

There are no *Mestizos* living in San Miguel Huaixtita. The primary and secondary school teachers are all indigenous people. The Huicholes are one of the indigenous groups in Mexico with the greatest incidence of monolinguals. They only speak their own language. The Huichol population is also notable among the different indigenous groups for professing a religion that is not Christian. Whilst 91% of Mexico’s total indigenous population is Christian, the proportion is only 48% in the case of the Huicholes. However, the Huichol people are deeply religious. Their visual productions (in the form of embroidery, offerings, and beadwork), as compared to that of the Tarascan Indians for example (Lumholtz, 1903:230), have a richly symbolic meaning. As a result, according to my informant, Benita, in ancient times “we did not sell our work, it was like selling our heart, our sign.”

Religion for the Huicholes is more abstract than figurative. Their places of worship<sup>4</sup> are not decorated, and only sometimes will there be temporal votive objects inside, perhaps a few arrows or the antlers of a deer. The profusely decorated bowls and woolen pictures are products made especially for sale to tourists and buyers from the towns. Huicholes do not worship images. What they consider sacred are features in the natural world (caves, hills, springs, the sea). Nor do they fabricate images to represent their gods. When the Huicholes take *peyote*<sup>5</sup>, they may see the gods revealed to them in their dreams, or else the gods

communicate with man in their own way. Huicholes do not even resort to images as a means of "instruction," as the ancient Christians used to do. Jorge, a Huichol father, told me: "It is here (in the *kaligüey*) where our customs are learnt, not in school, nor in books, nor in writings." Huicholes learn by seeing, hearing, feeling, memorizing. Benita added: "We didn't know whether our gods could be drawn, we only knew we had to respect them." Today, continued Benita, there is a relatively recent figure, that of Takutsi Nakawe, but the true face of the goddess is only revealed in dreams.

In San Miguel Huaixtita, the community is organized around traditional authorities and the community's own ritual practices. These characteristics, plus the inaccessibility of their territory, the absence of roads, electricity and mass media, all help to explain the permanence of their customs and traditions, as well as the importance the people themselves give to the preservation of their ethnic identity.

How variable and craggy their territory is, in the depth of the Sierra Madre Occidental, is demonstrated in the orography, which comprises heights ranging from 400 meters to 3000 meters above mean sea level. This produces a landscape of deep canyons between soaring mountains, and this makes communication with even the nearest urban centers extremely difficult. Travelling on foot is common in the Sierra. From San Miguel to San Andrés Cohamiata, it takes 12 hours on foot; to Jesús María, it is a day's walk; to Guadalupe Ocotán is a 12-hour walk; and to Mezquitic, it takes 3 days. Many young people in the secondary school come from places outside the community. At the weekend, those youngsters who live within a walking distance of two to five hours return home. Those whose families live further away only go home in the holidays.

Of the 90,000 km<sup>2</sup> the Huicholes claim as ancestral lands, only 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> is officially recognized as being Huichol territory. Approximately 20,000 Huicholes inhabit said area.

There is a rural radiotelephone antenna in San Miguel, which receives radiograms. This service is inefficient because it depends on the presence of a receiver, and that is not constant. A system of sending messages via people who come and go in and out of the Sierra, is much more common, in addition to the messages transmitted by radio. The teacher, Agustín, made clear for his students that, regardless, Huicholes had always communicated with each other, even if it had been in other ways. Before, "when the fire burned really brightly, that was the moment when we knew what was going to happen, it was a way of passing on information." Nowadays, according to the teacher, communication is much easier, "but they are rapid means, and this in itself causes mistakes."

San Miguel Huaixtita, Jalisco, has no advertising, hoardings, newspapers, nor even a mirror large enough for people to see their own body full-length, although there are some pocket-sized mirrors. House walls are rarely decorated,

either inside or out, and calendars with photographs are uncommon. Neither the primary nor the secondary school has any posters or decorations of either pictures or photographs in their classrooms. Illustrations in the textbooks, the few photographs that visitors bring to the community, photographs for official documents, and the labels on the few packaged products sold in the local shops, are all the Western images these people receive.

### **The Experience**

This research can be divided into three phases. In the initial phase, armed with bibliographic information on the Huichol culture, and the general objective of making contact with subjects who live cut off from the influence of the mass media, I entered into negotiations with the inhabitants of San Miguel Huaixtita. They only had a vague idea of my aims, but with their many disappointing experiences involving *mestizos* or foreigners, the local people themselves suggested an agreement: permission to carry out my research, in exchange for some community service which would take the form of my support, as a teacher, in the primary and secondary schools. This support turned into a workshop on Spanish language teaching, using the newspaper as teaching material (Corona, 1999a). The workshop included both the 300 primary school children and the 100 secondary school children. In its turn, the newspaper, which I took to the workshop on several occasions, also gave me the opportunity to observe their first contacts with the printed press, and the importance of images contained in those messages.

During the second phase, the teachers and traditional authorities agreed to the presence of 100 cameras in the secondary school. This is most unusual, because they are generally opposed to the taking of photographs inside their community. "Let them be shown to chroniclers," said Agustín, the teacher of Huichol culture, thereby assigning a purpose of education and historical record to the photography. Inevitably, the school context will have marked the results of these photographs, but the themes and takes still allow us to study the value judgments made, how the Huicholes use the camera, and what is seen by the Huichol eye.

In order to complement the information provided by these young people during my visits to the community, I also carried out a survey among the 100 secondary school students. Their responses regarding their experiences of photography, pictures, reading, writing and music, helped towards my understanding of the photographs they themselves took.

The third phase consisted of distributing 100 disposable cameras among the 100 secondary school students and teachers, each camera loaded with sufficient film for 27 photos. These cameras were greeted with enormous enthusiasm and interest.

Over the course of a week, the 100 secondary school students and teachers took photographs of their community, producing a total of 2700 photographs between them. For the majority, it was their first experience with a camera. One copy of each of his or her own developed photographs was returned to each participating student and teacher.

The image as a source of multiple meanings ran the risk of being interpreted only according to my own frame of reference. To avoid such a potential distortion, I used various devices to seek out the photographer's own version. On returning the photos to each young person, I asked them to choose, from their own collection, the photo they liked most, the one they liked least, and to tell me why. This gave me the first clue as to their objectives in the taking of those particular photos, the value judgments they were making, their tastes and preferences. Then, in addition, I also showed them a battery of professional photos taken in the city, and registered the classifications and arguments in their responses.

Regarding the photos in which the human body featured (in both my photos and their own), I noticed the preference of these people for photos which also included surroundings and contexts; and their distaste for photographs of "cut" people (less than the full body), close-ups or photos showing detail. I also learned that the use of black and white photography was identified particularly with photos required for identification and for official papers. The Huicholes showed the greatest interest when it came to photos taken within their own community.

To these findings, I also added the information I myself had gathered during other visits paid to the community over the span of three years. This allowed me to consider the specificity of photography as a means of communication. In other words, I was able to identify those factors which fall within the scope of what is photographable simply because of the particularity a camera offers, as opposed to other factors which fall within the realm of what is considered photograph-worthy from the Huichol perspective.

### **Some Results**

One question I considered was whether the functions of photography transcend what is beheld by the modern eye, and whether a camera in the hands of a Huichol Indian, who is far removed from Western values and from the visual image, responds to an autonomous aesthetic. Bourdieu believes that "even when the production of an image is credited entirely to the automatism of the machine, the photograph taken continues to be a choice which involves aesthetic and ethical values. Each group selects a finite, defined range of subjects, genres and compositions" (Bourdieu, 1979:22). This suggests that we should be able to recognize a Huichol photograph precisely because of what is photographed by a Huichol photographer. Nevertheless, the camera itself also seems to impose

certain defined practices, which are “stereotyped and less abandoned to the anarchy of individual intentions” (Bourdieu, 1979:38). In my opinion, these stereotyped practices are related to the tendency inherent in photography to praise, to fix, to solemnize, and to eternalize.

I began by classifying all the photographs according to themes suggested by those young people themselves. This resulted in the following distribution. Of the total 2700 photographs: 64.5% were of people, 26.8% featured nature and animals, 7.3% showed things, and 1.4% contained technical mistakes. This overwhelming preference for people as a theme, 64.5% of the photos taken, is noteworthy. Bourdieu too found that, in a selection of 500 photos taken by French photographers, 74% were of people (Bourdieu, 1979:61). This illustrates a similar tendency to prefer taking photos of people over any other theme.

In this paper, I am only going to discuss the photographs in which the human body appears. Comparing this modality to the initial uses made when photography was newly invented, it is clear that we can talk about taking photos of people as being a characteristic pertaining to the camera.

These young Huicholes, with no experience of pictures in their daily life, without the habit of taking photos, or of looking at themselves in a mirror, nevertheless still used the camera for the same purpose as the first uses of photography, which quickly adopted the function of producing portraits. The daguerreotypes coming out after 1840 were a commercial success, precisely because of their application in the portraits of people.

This particular corpus of photographs of people produced by these Huichol photographers, demonstrates a special management of space and of the human body within the margins of the photograph itself. The photographs are taken at normal focal length. Close-ups of human beings are almost non-existent. There were only two close-up photos of the human body in the whole corpus of 2700 photographs, and those photos were more probably taken because of the headphones the youngster was wearing rather than the actual face. On the other hand, close-ups were skillfully used to show fragments relevant to the preparation of a medicament, fragments relevant to collections of items forming part of meaningful compositions, or in the preparation of *tortillas*. It seemed as if, in common with the oral manner of relating stories, details were being described and emphasized.

The general takes produced by these Huichol photographers have the virtue of clearly showing a context. People posing or in action, have been photographed in their surroundings. The photographer has taken pains to move the camera to the left or right, in order to capture a complete image: perhaps people in front of their homes, where the photographer has incorporated the end of the adobe or stone wall, thereby allowing us to see fields beyond; or where the photographer has tilted the camera upwards to include the mountains; or where the photographer has placed people in the vertex of the intersection of

two walls or electricity lines, in order to capture both sides of the landscape. Where the photographer is inside a house, he or she has opened the window to include the world outside; and where the photographer is outside, he or she has opened the door to incorporate the inside of the house.

There are basically two types of photographs of people: one posed, and one in action. The pose has the person standing, facing the camera squarely, at a suitable distance, and wearing a serious, respectful expression. This is the pose characteristic of a Huichol photo, just as it is of other social groups. Taking photographs of each other behaving naturally is an effort that has often resulted in theatrical poses, and anyway it is an urban attitude towards the camera. The Huicholes preferred a clear pose that both demonstrates respect and demands respect. Standing poses, looking directly at the camera, an austere expression, perhaps the ceremonial pose of reading, these are bodily forms that display the manners regarded as socially acceptable within their community.

In fact, the frontal pose is linked to values, which are much more widely shared. In relation to photographs of French laborers, Bourdieu mentions that in many societies an honorable man is he who “faces (you squarely), who looks at others straight in the face” (Bourdieu, 1979:128).

The “posed” photographs repeat the position adopted of facing the camera squarely, arms at their sides, a serious expression or a slight smile. It seems to be a formal attitude towards photography, far removed from the well-known smile that Edgar Morin considers one of the keys to photography in our modern, mainly Western cultures: “Smile... Put your soul in the window of your face” (Morin, 1972:43), a maxim which serves to stimulate sentimentalism in the management of the face in the Western culture of pictures.

In the photos analyzed, people have posed adopting a standing posture or seated on rocks or on the ground. Only in one photograph does a child appear with his arm around the neck of another child, his other arm raised in a gesture indicating strength. It is not mere coincidence that this, the only picture showing a different pose, is the photo of a boy who also happens to be the only *Mestizo* person living in the community, sent there by his father, a laborer working on the Nayarit coast.

There are some variations to be observed in the most characteristic poses. These occur, in the case of men, where they are wearing modern clothes and have put their hands in the pockets of their trousers or jacket. In the case of the young girls, they have taken turns posing in a pair of dark glasses, their hands placed on their waist; or in other photos, the same young girls are posing holding fizzy drinks and playfully pretending to be “drinking.”

Where the human body had been photographed, it was always whole. The Huicholes did not photograph half the body or close-ups. For the Huicholes, who are not familiar with the close-up shot commonly used on television, in the cinema and in advertising, what might a dismembered body signify?

In their handicrafts of beadwork, embroidery and woolen pictures, the figures are always whole. The exception is when portraying the faces of their gods. "When you take *peyote*, you see the deer like this first, only its face," Daniel Castro, a Huichol artisan, told me, indicating one of his woolen pictures. When humans approach the gods, they do so face to face. Perhaps that is why it is only the gods who appear without a body, never people, who, after all, always communicate using their entire body.

According to Edgar Morin, the era of the close-up, which favors the human face, has transformed civilization. In the cinema, on television and in advertising, the face has acquired a unique, supreme authority, where all dramas are focused and all the action happens. And what is the effect of this? An abnormal increase in the satisfaction of feelings, which, with all this exaggeration, are only impoverished and hardened.

In stark contrast to aestheticism, to the handling of moods on people's faces, in nature, in takes with their marked angles, in colors, in fact in contrast to all this exaltation of feelings as being characteristic of the culture of images, the photos taken by the Huicholes show contexts, meticulous descriptions and multiple details. Their technique of photographs taken at normal focal length, with austere poses, favors the seeing of complete worlds instead of simply feeling subjective impressions.

Studying the actual discourses of different social groups, we are able to observe that our ways of seeing are defined in the inter-relation of communicative technologies with all the diverse forms of communication each social group manages. Even if the camera imposes the vision of a Cyclops, the photographer still negotiates his or her own viewpoint in the photos taken. Photographs enable us to observe the tension between technology and the eye of the beholder. Photographs articulate and offer anyone studying them, the possibility of distinguishing between what is the technological, homogenizing component, and what is the actual vision of the individual subjects as defined by their own communicative surroundings.

## CONCLUSIONS

Indigenous people have been photographed ever since the invention of the photographic camera. The first of these photographs, taken by travelers, reveal fascination with and racism toward the Indian. Celebrations and rituals have been photographed by anthropologists, tourists and keen photographers. Journalistic and artistic photos either demonstrate an admiration for the exotic, the picturesque, the unusual, or provoke feelings of guilt because of the poverty visible in the photos. Some photos are stealthily taken, "captured" by hidden photographers who, in the interests of "objectivity," surprise the Indian.

The study reported in this article is probably the first time that 100 young indigenous people have actually revealed their true face, because they

themselves were photographing each other with their own cameras. The 2700 photos allow us to come closer to a representation of the Indian's own reality as seen by the Indians themselves. As opposed to photographs taken by others, and in which the Indian is the object of the photo, these 2700 photos feature the Indians as subjects who are putting themselves on display.

What we see in these photos is not a tourist, scientific or commercial product, nor is it a passive, surprised or disgusted participation on the part of the person photographed. It is the conscious desire to show themselves off and to be remembered by future generations. This very fact allowed me to explore their identity, ideals and aspirations.

The face shown, according to Goffman (1991), is the face that is chosen carefully, and the face seen here is one of hope, of pride in the world they have inherited and which they find in motion, of faith in the future, the desire to perpetuate. The photographs show the youthful eye of the photographers, their vitality, their interests, the way they want others to see them. The photos are far from being those of the bucolic Indian, extravagant, strange, sad, resigned.

The construction of a plural society requires that actors relate to each other without prejudice, and free of stigmatizing stereotypes. The possibility of discussing our differences - a duty we can no longer defer - depends on having regard for others. If we agree to view others as they themselves want to be seen, we are in a position to relate to our contemporaries horizontally, on the same level, in a mutual recognition of equals.

At the same time, the tendency towards cultural homogenization, motivated by an expansion of the mass media, seems to suggest there is only one way of beholding. However, the discourse coming out of different social groups allows us to observe that, in the co-existence of communicative technologies and the various forms of communication, the groups themselves do actually define the manner of beholding.

Photographs suggest a negotiation with technology, in that cameras have limits imposed by their technological specificity. What I have tried to demonstrate is the manner in which the force of different ways of beholding merges with that of technology and materializes in photographs. I have argued that the negotiation between technology and the an-iconic vision has revealed two principles: the first has to do with studying what is photographable within the limits imposed by the actual camera, and the second relates to what the Huichol Indian chooses to behold.

In the photographs analyzed, the possibilities of lasting, of remembering, of standing out, are all actions of the camera that the Huichol youngsters have negotiated in their own way. As a result, there seem to be two particular means of "filling" the photos from the viewpoint of the Huichol photographer: takes and themes.

With regard to the takes, we need to highlight the Huichol's absolute rejection of shots that are not general or have no context; also that close-ups are used only as a tool for showing detail, or as part of a series to describe a process (healing, preparation of food, dwellings, etc.). These choices can be explained by the over-riding presence of the oral means of communication, and the wisdoms that this implies (the need for context to convey the whole; rhythm as a mnemonic device; collective authorship). The choices can also be understood in the light of the Huicholes' infrequent contact with writing (and with any experience regarding the fixed point, linearity, individual authorship), as well as their ignorance of western iconic models.

With regard to themes, the Huicholes' subject of choice was the person. However, the people themselves, their poses, their activities, the objects photographed with them, all also reveal choices made by the Huichol photographer. Having no knowledge of the artistic and/or commercial pose of the mass media, nor any experience of the segmented bodies in media close-ups, the Huicholes chose the frontal pose, the complete body set in its geographic and cultural environment: clothes, dwellings, votive objects, food. They also took photos of each other with Western objects that seemed memorable to them and which were available: books, radios, soft drinks, and dark glasses. These objects have no names in their own language, and the young Huicholes have had to become acquainted both with the item as well as its name, and then to translate both into their everyday life. In so doing, the Huicholes are translating Western signification into their own culture.

In a desire to comprehend more fully the visual culture of the West, it seemed appropriate to turn to the opposite extreme: subjects who live without media images. This particular exploration has revealed signs of an an-iconic vision, as well as indications of the features that arise from the discipline of the beholding eye in video-cultures. Developing this idea further, might usefully contribute to knowledge about communicative competences in oral cultures, and also to an understanding of the transformations of highly iconic contemporary cultures.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Huicholes are one of the 54 indigenous ethnic groups who inhabit Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> The Huichol language belongs to the “Uto-Aztec” family, and the present written form of writing the Huichol language only began in 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Mestizo is a person of mixed races. The Huichol Indians consider Mestizo anybody that is not indigenous. In Mexico the dominant population is Mestizo.

<sup>4</sup> Called “kaligüey”.

<sup>5</sup> *Cactacea mexicana*, cactus that causes hallucinations when ingested, which the Huicholes use in their rituals.

