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Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians. 2000 by Anne Makepeace Productions, Inc.; Thirteen/WNET; Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated by Mick Gidley

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1997 for a Smithsonian audience attending that year's Asian-Pacific Film Festival, many viewers flatly refused to accept its "fictional" label. Some insisted that if they could "only get more information" they could get to the "truth" of the whole thing. For those of us who routinely teach film or teach with film, this is a work that deserves to be on the top our critical study list.

Note

1. The "authorial" voices of the fair presenters in this film are actual quotes from historical transcripts or books, including *The Bontoc Igorot* by Albert E. Jenks, Ethnological Survey Publications, vol. 1, Department of the Interior, 1905.

2. From soundtrack of the film, also from Albert E. Jenks (1905). ♦

Working Sister. 1999. 27 minutes, color. A film by *Jennifer Steffans*. For more information, contact University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center Street, Fourth Floor, Berkeley, CA 94704.

GENE COOPER

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This film, submitted by its director for the M.A. in Fine Arts at Loyola Marymount University, portrays something of the life circumstances of a seventeen-year-old member of the "floating population" of migrant workers that has emerged in the context of China's most recent two decades of economic reform.

The film opens with the heroine, Xu Lili, making preparations to return home for the New Year's holiday. Lili works in Dongguan, Guangdong (very near to the Hong Kong border) at a factory manufacturing toys for export. Her job is to put the final gloss on toy trucks, using a polishing cloth, and there are some reasonable shots of Lili and her fellow workers at work in the modern facilities of an apparent China-HK joint venture factory.

While we are told that Lili traveled hundreds of miles in a move to the factory to work, and provided footage of her parents speaking from their home, we are never told where exactly her home is (not even the province), a significant omission in a would-be ethnographic/documentary film. If the footage with that information on it ended up on the cutting room floor (or as seems more likely the MAC trash bin) by accident, perhaps it could be digitally recovered. But this points to the most serious shortcoming of this film for an anthropological audience. While the film portrays a slice of Lili's life, it appears to have been conceived in a fine arts context and lacks critical perspective.

Thus we are treated to shots of Lili's parents commenting on their daughter's early life experiences; her factory supervisor evaluating her performance in the factory; the workers commenting on how good the food provided in the factory is; Lili considering what she will do if she is unable to secure a train ticket home; Lili reading a letter from home; her parents commenting on where her self-reliance and independence comes from; her parents voicing different opinions about the suitability of going to others for help; her mother expressing dissatisfaction with a society in which women still encounter obstacles to educational advancement; Lili telling us her goal in life is to make enough money to rent a shop and open a karaoke bar. They are nicely spliced together, but they don't add up to much.

Lili arrives home for New Year's, and everyone is happy. She gives presents to everyone, doling them out from a duffel bag, like Santa Claus. They make dumplings. Her parents are asked how their daughter has changed, and they respond that she's got a haircut and gotten taller. The family eats a New Year's evening meal together.

There are some interesting uses of fast motion, and the music is nicely done, but overall the film comes over as sentimental, even naive. The film's exclusive focus on the microlevel tends to trivialize the experience of the millions of workers like Lili who work long and tedious hours under constant and strict supervision during the other 50 weeks of the year, producing super profits for multinational corporations. Her matronly supervisor at the factory is not given a chance to show us what happens to girls like Lili and her fellow workers when they breach company discipline. There is no consideration of Lili as representative of a new class of semi-proletarianized rural folk and no thought given as to how new opportunities for wage labor have affected rural life, for better or for worse.

But even at the microlevel, the film doesn't begin to scratch the surface, not even, for example, giving some attention to the symbolism of the New Year's evening meal, to the foods consumed, if not the rituals (no longer?) performed. Again, I think this is symptomatic of the film's origin as a fine arts documentary lacking an ethnographic consciousness.

So overall, the film is pleasant to watch, competently constructed, with a reasonable story line. But the lack of critical background and macrolevel analysis provided to the viewer would make this film difficult (if not misleading) to use without an instructor well enough versed in China's current situation to provide students with the broader interpretive framework necessary to evaluate the action in the film. The film itself does not provide that framework. In a course dealing with China as the principal focus, or with the current situation of rural folk in other parts of Asia, the larger contextual issues that the film does not address could be considered in a broader societal or comparative framework, although the absence of provenience remains bothersome. But for these reasons, the film appears to be of limited use in introductory courses where one may not have sufficient time or areal competence to develop the necessary context for interpretation. ♦

Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians. 2000. A video by *Anne Makepeace*. 85 minutes (56-minute version also available). Co-produced by Anne Makepeace Productions, Inc. and Thirteen/WNET. For further information, contact Bullfrog Films, P.O. Box 149, Oley, PA 19547; 1-800-543-FROG (3764); info@bullfrogfilms.com.

Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated. *Mick Gidley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 319 pp.

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Why is anyone still interested in Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952), the photographer and filmmaker who contributed so

much to the stereotypical imagery of North American Indians as the “Vanishing Race”? Considering allegations that he faked authenticity for the sake of romantic appeal, few scholars have seriously considered him as one of visual anthropology’s fore-runners. However, newly sensitized by postmodernist theories, some of us have become quite comfortable with the idea of blurring conventional boundaries between reality and imagination. Demystifying the fictions of scientific objectivity, we have even learned to appreciate the possibility of multiple concurrent truths. In light of such innovative theoretical perspectives, coupled with additional research information, it is perhaps time to reconsider earlier dismissive verdicts about Curtis’s oeuvre and reexamine his amateur outsider status as a visual ethnographer.

For those willing to entertain such revisionist ideas, Mick Gidley’s authoritative study *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* is absolutely indispensable. Splendidly complementing his thorough examination of archival sources and lucid interpretation, a new documentary film by Anne Makepeace also offers much more than just another overview of his life and works. Titled *Coming To Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians*, it critically explores his remarkable legacy with intelligence and sensitivity.

Appealing to his society’s infatuation with romantic primitivism, Curtis portrayed American Indians to conform to the cultural archetype of the “vanishing Indian.” Elaborated since the 1820s, this ideological construct effectively captured the ambivalent racism of Anglo-American society, which repressed Native spirituality and traditional customs while creating cultural space for the invented Indian of romantic imagination. However distorted and distorting, the idea that Indians were vanishing was not entirely a phantom of wishful thinking. When Curtis embarked upon his project, U.S. and Canadian authorities were busy enforcing a host of ethnocidal programs aimed at decimating North America’s surviving indigenous peoples. About this time, these Indians had also reached their demographic nadir. And although the twentieth century has been marked by an unexpected demographic rebound, a treasure of cultural traditions has really vanished, and dozens of indigenous languages are no longer actually spoken. Ironically, this exotic “Indian” imagery, as conjured up by romantic primitivism, has played a curious role in the political and cultural reawakening in Indian Country since the late 1960s. As explored in this film, Curtis’s sepia-toned photographs (in which material evidence of Western civilization has often been erased) had special appeal for this “Red Power” movement and even helped inspire it.

Although some of my observations also concern Gidley’s book, this review focuses on the film written, directed, and produced by Makepeace. Instead of showing reenactments of Curtis’s own life experiences (which was a major component of the 1975 filmic biography, *The Shadow Catcher*), Makepeace’s film is primarily about the mixed impact of his work in Indian Country today. The film’s structure consists of a series of sequences detailing three main elements conjoined by a contrastive editing style. One element concerns the usual drama of Curtis’s life, showing him as an obsessive workaholic sacrificing marriage, personal finance, and comfort. A second features a variety of academic “talking heads” such as Curtis biographer Barbara Davis, photohistorian Rod Slemmons, Northwest Coast Indian art specialist Bill Holm, and cultural historian Gidley expertly commenting on his personal tribulations and profes-

sional accomplishments. The third element—and this is really what makes this production so significant and compelling—presents a wide range of contemporary American Indian reactions to Curtis’s oeuvre.

Following Curtis’s footsteps to several Indian Reservations west of the Mississippi, as well as to Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea, Makepeace showed his pictures to an interesting mix of individuals, including some whose own ancestors had been portrayed by Curtis sometime between 1896 and 1930. Their responses to the photographs, elicited by Makepeace, are fascinating. Commenting on the significance of these images for themselves and their tribal communities, some voice anger and sharply condemn Curtis as a cultural exploiter. Many more, however, express strong appreciation for his work as he skillfully captured a few precious memories of a more blissful past. Quite intriguing also is the apparent indifference of some indigenous folk toward the photographs (such as Yupik elder Joe Moses of Nunivak Island, who, upon being shown a picture of himself as a parka-clad toddler on his mother’s back, quickly points to the photo, says “me,” and then just runs off).

Through a montage of striking images originally photographed by Curtis and contemporary footage of matching scenes filmed by Makepeace and her crew, an effective device employed throughout this documentary film, *Coming To Light* opens and closes with a sequence of contemporary Blackfeet Indians on horseback, carrying green willow branches to build sweat lodges for the purification ritual preceding the Sun Dance ceremony. The tranquil scene with a white pickup truck following the riders to the encampment of white canvas tepees is emblematic for the way in which tradition and modernity ideally mesh in contemporary tribal cultures.

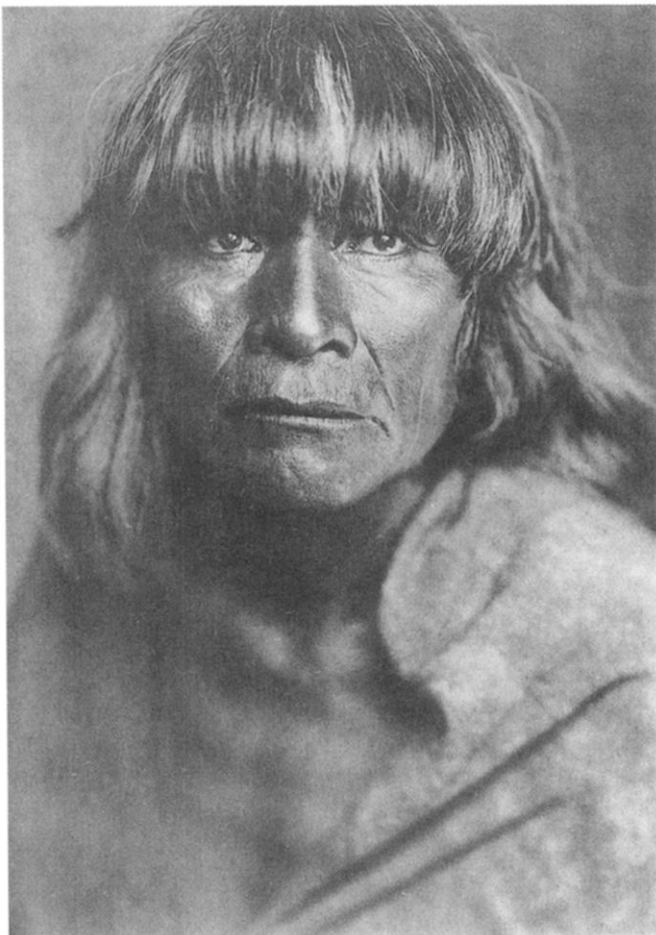
On the heels of this opening, Makepeace introduces Curtis in broad strokes that will be detailed in the course of the film. For instance, we are told that he had little formal education and taught himself photography from self-help manuals, even making his own first crude camera himself. Constantly on the move and traveling with about one ton of equipment, he spent more than thirty years completing his great project to document the indigenous peoples and tribal cultures of North America. Always working under great pressure, he visited about eighty tribes. In addition to collecting a considerable amount of ethnographic information, he made well over 40,000 photographs, produced several ethnographic films, and recorded many hundreds of Indian songs on wax rolls in his “magic box.”

Early in the film we learn that Curtis took his first known “Indian picture” near his home at Puget Sound in 1896: a portrait of an elderly Suquamish clam digger known among whites as Princess Angeline, daughter of Chief Siah (Seattle). In the next few years, he photographed more Northwest Coast Indian subjects and won several national awards. Conforming to its editing structure, the film then cuts to a contemporary sequence in which a Suquamish woman named Pegi Deam tells us that she has grown up with Curtis’s photographs. “I was hungry for my own culture,” she explains. Commenting on the significance of these old pictures, she asserts that “there are definitely things locked up in there that are available to us.”

Returning to Curtis’s pictures, the film chronicles his 1900 visit to the Blackfeet (Southern Piegan) reservation in Montana. While there he attended a spectacular Sun Dance, and, remarkably, received permission (probably from the tribe’s head chief

White Calf) to take some photographs, but not of the actual ceremony itself. The experience made a deep impression on Curtis, who had ample reason to believe that he had witnessed a cultural tradition that was about to disappear forever. After all, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs had tried (in vain) to suppress this ceremony from 1887 onward, even jailing those who refused to give up their traditional ceremonies.

Seeking contemporary Blackfeet reactions to these photographs, Makepeace then cuts to a scene she filmed almost a century later. No doubt because of the rather complex situation of the Blackfeet as a cross-border ethnic group, the film erroneously implies that the Sun Dance was terminated among all four closely related tribes collectively known as Blackfeet. Curtis photographed and described the Blackfeet in Montana, also known as Southern Piegan or Pigunni. The other three Blackfeet tribes (First Nations) reside on reserves in Alberta: Peigan (Northern Piegan), Kainaiwa (Blood), and Siksika (Blackfeet). Whereas the Canadian Blackfeet actually stopped performing the Sun Dance after 1895, the Southern Piegan managed to hang on to a slightly modified version of their ancestral ceremony.



Simply titled "Hopi Man," this picture shows the Snake Priest Sikyaletstiwa who agreed to induct Curtis into his Snake Dance society at Supawlavi, one of the Hopi villages on the Second Mesa, Arizona, in 1906. From: Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 12 (1922), plate no. 420.

Nonetheless, this segment reveals the impact Curtis's photographs have had in Native circles. Here, a Canadian Blackfeet tribesman named Jerry Potts (Peigan) recounts when he first saw Curtis's pictures of a Blackfeet Sun Dance hanging at his reserve's cultural center in the mid-1970s. Stirred by these old pictures and struck by the irony that traditionally clad tribesmen were actually photographed practicing prohibited "heathen" ceremonies, Potts wondered if the Sun Dance could be resurrected in his community. At the time, there were still some elders alive who remembered how to properly conduct the ritual. Soon afterward, Canadian Blackfeet began holding their Sun Dance again on a regular basis.

Fascinated by still-enduring cultural traditions in besieged Indian tribal communities such as the Blackfeet, Curtis decided to embark on a massive salvage ethnography project and create an enormous visual archive of those tribes still retaining many of their "primitive traits." In 1904, he traveled to the Navajo Reservation where he persuaded some reluctant tribesmen to stage a *yabachi* (medicine) dance for his new "motion picture machine," or kinoscope. Soon afterwards, three of the Navajo dancers were arrested for having participated in a prohibited ceremony.

After showing a brief sequence of this rare *yabachi* footage, Makepeace cuts to contemporary Navajo traditionalist Avery Denny, who sharply criticizes Curtis for having violated a taboo on recording this sacred ritual. But he then explains that the film actually did no real harm because the ceremony had been performed "backwards" with the participants dancing counterclockwise and holding the rattles in their left hands. In contrast to Denny, a Navajo elder named Edward Harvey tells us that seeing Curtis's pictures of traditional sand paintings makes him "feel good inside," as they remind him of his father.

Good memories about Curtis also linger among some of the Hopi at Oraibi. During his first visit to their mesa villages in 1900, he was especially intrigued by a performance of the mysterious Snake Dance. A dramatized prayer for rain, this curious ritual had already become a destiny of choice for railway tourists. Curtis, however, saw it as an opportunity for participant-observation. He appealed to the Snake Priest Sikyaletstiwa, begging to be initiated into his dance society. Although he was rebuffed, he succeeded in getting permission to film the ceremony during his 1904 voyage to the Hopi mesas. (A brief clip of archival footage appears in Makepeace's film.) Two years later, Sikyaletstiwa finally agreed to induct Curtis into the Snake Dance society. Further exploring Curtis's legacy among the Hopi, Makepeace introduces contemporary tribal elder Riley Sunrise, Sikyaletstiwa's grandson, who fondly remembers Curtis and tells us that he was "an honest man." A fellow tribeswoman, named Theoria Howatu, confides that seeing Curtis's photograph of her grandmother as a maiden made her "excited." Later she admits: "You really see what was tradition back then. When I was growing up . . . tradition was not really that big. Now it's going back towards the more traditional. And we have these pictures to show us how they really were back then."

Not being able to accomplish his mammoth project by himself, Curtis sought and initially succeeded in gaining support from the political, financial, and intellectual elite. Endorsed by President Theodore Roosevelt, underwritten by the banker J. P. Morgan, assisted in his ethnographic fieldwork by William E.



"Snake Dancers among the Plaza; At right stand the Antelopes, in front of the [cottonwood branch] booth containing the snake-jars. The Snakes enter the Plaza, encircle it four times with military tread, and then after a series of songs remarkable for their irresistible movement, they proceed to dance with the reptiles."—Hopi at Oraibi Village, Arizona, 1904 (?). Plate 422. From: Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. 12 (1922), p. 69.

Meyers, and with anthropologist Frederick Hodge of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology serving as his editor, Curtis published the first of the twenty-volume series titled *The North American Indian* in 1907.

The following year, Curtis returned to Montana, this time to photograph, among others, Crow Indians (Apsaroke) as well as Atsina (A'ani or Gros Ventre) at Fort Belknap Reservation. One of his subjects was an Atsina tribal leader named Waatyanath ("Horse Capture"). Long after his death, his great-grandson George Horse Capture was shown his photograph and was deeply touched. Speaking on camera, he flatly rejects the notion that Curtis's pictures are "stereotypes" and maintains that he had credibly portrayed these "powerful" ancestors: "He did a monumental job. If he hadn't come along and recorded this, the loss would have been tremendous." This praise for Curtis as a cultural preservationist is also echoed by Carol Murray, a young Blackfeet woman: "The more you learn about the culture, the more you appreciate his pictures. . . . That is what Curtis's photographs will contribute to us . . . , they're going to trigger those memory stops to start up again."

Constantly facing creditors and pressed to raise additional funds to complete his North American Indian project, Curtis resolved to produce a commercial docudrama on the Kwakiutl (Kwagiulth/Kwakwaka'wakw) of Vancouver Island. With the advice of George Hunt, a Native informant who also worked for Columbia University anthropology professor Franz Boas as a key informant, Curtis hired local Kwakiutl as actors. A compromise between feature and documentary, this ethnofiction film portrayed the culture of this Northwest coast tribe before white "contamination." Accordingly, in spite of the fact that Canadian authorities had officially banned the potlatch since 1884, Curtis talked the Kwakiutl into staging this ritual feast before his film camera. Needing some dramatic adventure, he rented a dead whale and asked the Kwakiutl to stage a whale hunt (something



"Horse Capture"—Atsina (Gros Ventre), Fort Belknap Reservation, Montana, 1908. Plate 170. From: Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. 5 (1909).

they traditionally did not engage in). Titled *In the Land of the Headhunters*, the film was completed in 1914, about the time World War I broke out. Despite rave reviews, it was a box office flop. In 1974, after a restored version was shown to the Kwakiutl community and a new soundtrack had been added, the reedited film was released as *In the Land of the War Canoes*. Commenting on the 1914 film, Kwakiutl elder Gloria Cranmer Webster (many of her aunts and uncles were among the original performers) chuckles: "Our ancestors were real showmen." Noting that with this film Curtis had made his mark as an ethnographic film pioneer well before Flaherty released his 1922 film *Nanook of the North*, she proudly claims: "We were there first!"

In 1918, Curtis was completely broke and moved to Los Angeles where he worked on Tarzan movies, among others. Three years later, he left Hollywood and returned to the Southwest to photograph real people—once again American Indians. In 1922, after a six-year hiatus, he published volume 12 (on the Hopi). The following year, he went to photograph northern California's Indians, an experience he found deeply distressing as he recognized how ruthless white racism had wreaked havoc on these indigenous peoples, nearly wiping them from the face of the earth. In 1927, accompanied by his daughter Beth (who also financed this journey), Curtis sailed to the Bering Sea. Working on his last volume, he was delighted to photograph Nunivak Eskimos



“Masked Dancers—Qagyuhl.” Kwakiutl, Fort Rupert, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, 1913. Plate 358. From: Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. 10 (1915).

and exulted: “Finally, I have found a place where no missionary has worked. . . .”

However, when Curtis finally completed his 20-volume project *The North American Indian* in 1930, the American public had become indifferent toward romantic exoticism, daunted by the harsh reality of the Great Depression. Failing to sell enough subscriptions to finance printing costs, his company North American Indian, Inc. went bankrupt. His creditors acquired all his remaining property, including the photogravures and copper printing plates, which were bought up by a Boston bookstore and soon vanished from sight. By the time he died in 1952, the 84-year-old Curtis had become ignored, and his life’s work was largely forgotten.

Some twenty years after his death, a clerk in the Boston bookstore accidentally stumbled onto this forgotten stash of copper etchings made from Curtis’s glass-plate negatives. Romantic

nostalgic interest in American Indians was just peaking again. In 1971, Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* and the new paperback version of John Neihardt’s 1932 book *Black Elk Speaks* became instant bestsellers. With the time ripe for a Curtis revival, T. C. McLuhan published a selection of his sepia-toned Indian pictures in an anthology, *Touch the Earth*. And while Curtis’s photographs quickly became immensely profitable, they also inspired the cultural revitalization movement in many American Indian communities.

Beautifully filmed, skillfully edited and well-paced, *Coming To Light* is highly recommended for courses on North American Indians, visual anthropology, and American popular culture. Well researched and deftly touching on the complex politics of cross-cultural visual representation, Makepeace’s film and Gidley’s book both exhibit a balanced perspective on Curtis as a trailblazer in visual ethnography.