

Communication: The Expectation of Interaction

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I. The complexity of interpersonal communication

Let me start with a brief passage from a nineteenth-century English novel: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72). In chapter 27 of this novel a young and 'eligible' doctor named Lydgate has been visiting his sick patient Fred Vincy and has been forced into contact with Fred's pretty but superficial sister Rosamond.

[Fred's mother Mrs Vincy] never left Fred's side when her husband was not in the house, and thus Rosamond was in the unusual position of being much alone. Lydgate, naturally, never thought of staying long with her, yet it seemed that the brief impersonal conversations they had together were creating that peculiar intimacy which consists in shyness. They were obliged to look at each other in speaking, and somehow the looking could not be

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carried through as the matter of course which it really was. Lydgate began to feel this sort of consciousness unpleasant, and one day looked down, or anywhere, like an ill-worked puppet. But this turned out badly: the next day, Rosamond looked down, and the consequence was that when their eyes met again, both were more conscious than before. There was no help for this in science, and as Lydgate did not want to flirt, there seemed to be no help for it in folly. It was therefore a relief when neighbours no longer considered the house in quarantine, and when the chances of seeing Rosamond alone were very much reduced.

But that intimacy of mutual embarrassment, in which each feels that the other is feeling something, having once existed, its effect is not to be done away with. (299)

I have often used this passage to start off exploring some issues relating to interpersonal communication in general, and the communicative significance of eye-contact in particular.¹ Some of the points that I would draw attention to be as follows.

- Interpersonal communication is not a linear, one-way process. When two people are together and aware of each other, they are both continuously giving off information to the other and receiving information from him or her. When we search for information from another person we simultaneously reveal things about ourselves, including things that we may not wish to reveal or of which we are unaware.

- The passage exemplifies what a classic study of communication calls 'the impossibility of not communicating' (Watzlawick, *et al.* 48). Even the attempt to not communicate, communicates (Kendon 86; Korte 62).² Skilled communicators know how to disguise the fact that

¹ See, for example, my 'Theories of the gaze' in Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Modern Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming [2004]), and my 'Death and the image: photography, the gaze, and the limits of realism', forthcoming, publication details unavailable.

² Compare Adam Kendon's point that a participant in a conversational dyad "who

they are trying not to communicate (for example, to take a familiar example, by means of 'diplomatic sickness'), or by adopting a form of camouflage-behaviour (such as the 'flirting' mentioned in the passage).

- Note in particular here that it is 'a relief' for both individuals when the neighbours can come into the house again, so that they are not left alone. Communicating energetically with one person is a good way of disguising your difficulties in communicating with another. Conversely, suddenly being forced to communicate with one person—in an elevator, for example—can cause embarrassment.

- Interpersonal communication is what we can clumsily call 'multi-channel'. In this case, the *words* that are spoken form only one aspect—and a relatively unimportant aspect—of the total communicative process. (George Eliot does not even tell us what these words were.) Interrogators—customs and immigration officials, for example—are skilled not just in *registering* non-verbal behaviour but in *triggering* it.

- Interpersonal communication is a cumulative process: our memory of previous exchanges conditions our interpretations and our behaviour. There is no 'delete' button to press with regard to our remembered interaction.

- Interpersonal communication does not take place between two neutral transmitting/receiving devices: it is saturated with the residues of our social existence—for example, those relating to culture, class, gender and sexuality, and economics.

looked away whenever the level of emotionality rose beyond a certain level, could be interpreted as engaging in a “cut-off” act, which resulted in a reduction of the arousal of both participants, and that the level of emotionality in an encounter could be regulated by the amount of mutual gaze the participants permitted each other” (Kendon 86). But the passage from *Middlemarch* reminds us that such a ‘cut-off’ act may in certain circumstances serve actually to increase rather than reduce the level of emotionality. As Barbara Korte puts it, ‘the avoidance of eye contact is commonly interpreted as an indication of fear, insecurity, or embarrassment’ (Korte 62).

- Finally: in the presence of another person we have expectations; we expect them to communicate with us, and we expect that they will be interpreting our behaviour.

When any two people are placed in a communicative situation all of these factors condition the expectations of both of them, whether they are conscious of this or not.

One other brief comment on the above passage. 'George Eliot' was a pseudonym; the writer's real name was Mary Ann Evans, and she was a woman. A number of recent theorists of 'the gaze' have argued that in western cultures there is a general, over-riding convention that those with power look, and those without power are looked at. Traditionally, then, women are the objects of the male gaze.³ But the evidence of much English literature suggests that women may often be more intelligent and perceptive lookers than are men. There is a revealing comment in Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), where the heroine feels that she knows more about a particular man than does her friend Mrs Jennings: "she could not help believing herself the nicest observer of the two; —she watched his eyes, while Mrs Jennings thought only of his behaviour". Both Jane Austen and George Eliot know that to see into a man's secret thoughts, a close attention to what he does with his eyes is the best method of detection.

II. Expectations

Although communication involves the receiving or imparting of new information, it relies upon certain expectations being satisfied. We give a range of terms to the rules that form and govern such

³ Although Kendon (83) reports research findings that women in dyads do actually look more than men.

expectations: conventions, scripts, grammars, registers, genres, for example. When I walk in a room to deliver a lecture in a country that I have never visited before—such as Korea—I have a general 'script'⁴ of what 'giving a lecture' involves, although as this is a culture with which I am not familiar, I am prepared to find that the script is not quite the same as the ones with which I am familiar. Thus if people listening to my lecture behave in ways that are unfamiliar to me, I will keep a more open mind with regard to the significance of the unexpected than I would do in a culture with which I was familiar.

Not all expectations are held consciously, and just as a native speaker of a language who has no formal education will be quite unable to formulate the grammatical rules operative in his or her language, so too we may find it very hard to formulate the expectations that we have with regard to a range of communicative situations. We typically become conscious of such rules and conventions when our expectations are frustrated, when things that we are expecting to happen do not happen, and when things that we are not expecting to happen take place. (The shoe that does not drop and the dog that does not bark may be more communicatively significant than the shoes and the dogs that behave as we expect them to.⁵ Part of what is depicted as happening in the passage from *Middlemarch* is that Rosamond's expectations concerning normal interactive behaviour between two people in a merely formal relationship are frustrated: instead of meeting her gaze in conversation, Lydgate looks down. According to Adam Kendon, 'looking steadily' at a person with whom

⁴ For a description of 'Script theory', see Schank and Abelson (1977).

⁵ In the first case in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* the detective is struck while investigating the theft of a racehorse by "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." When he is told that the dog did nothing in the night-time he responds: "That was the curious incident." So far as the shoes are concerned, in an old anecdote a man who expects his upstairs neighbour to drop both his shoes on the floor when going to bed is kept awake all night because he hears only *one* shoe drop!

one is having a conversation indicates that the person so looking “is now ‘open’ to [the other person's] actions, whatever they may be” (Kendon 64). By looking down, in other words, Lydgate lets Rosamond know that he is *not* open to her actions. She is thus able immediately to deduce that for him their relationship is actually or potentially more than merely a formal one. Lydgate is embarrassed, and as a result *she* becomes embarrassed and looks down the next time that the two meet. George Eliot's narrator refers to this 'mutual embarrassment' as 'intimacy', and it is typical of intimate situations that every piece of behaviour has communicative significance all actions become signs. More important: we *expect* that everything that we do will be treated as a sign rather than as neutral piece of scripted behaviour. (There is no surer way to make someone nervous and to ensure that they will behave in an unnatural manner than that of saying: “I want to observe your normal behaviour, so please pretend that I am not here, just go on doing what you would do were I not watching you.”)

In an interpersonal situation we expect interaction, and there are rules and conventions within a culture that like the grammar of a language help us to formulate our own behavioural moves and to interpret the behaviour of someone with whom we are interacting. Misunderstandings can occur when people from different cultures meet, or even when people from different groups within the same culture interact. Thus Hecht, Andersen and Ribeau (1989) refer to studies that suggest that cultures differ in the signs of power.

In the United States, downcast eyes and a body position below that of another would probably be seen as subordinate. In Japanese culture, however, downcast eyes are signs of attentiveness and agreement....

In a Black-White conversation, a Black listener will look less than a White speaker expects. This may lead the White interactant to assume disinterest on the part of the Black listener. Conversely, when the Black interactant is talking, both parties will be looking more than each expects. Such overly long, mutual gazes are often interpreted as hostility. In this example, interpretations of disinterest and hostility may be produced by cultural patterning in power-related nonverbal cues. In addition, Blacks decrease gaze while in the presence of powerful people, while Whites increase the amount of gaze in these situations.... (Hecht, *et al.* 174)

But problems of communication may occur not just as a result of cultural variation. There are also problems that are caused by technology, problems that result from a tension between what our interpersonal training, experience, and cultural heritage have caused us to expect and what advances in technology require us to respond to.

Our biological inheritance prepares us for lives in which we communicate directly with other human individuals. But we now live in a world in which the word 'communication' conjures up not so much an image of two individuals interacting, but images of a range of technologies that mediate between human beings through vast distances of time and space. We are an adaptive species and generally speaking we have adapted to such technological advances remarkably well. The sight of my eight year-old grand-daughter explaining to my wife how to do new things with her computer reminds me just how good human beings are at advancing beyond the limits of our biological inheritance. Nonetheless, there do come times when technology places us in situations that go against the grain of our communicative inheritance and experience. We expect to be able to interact with those human beings we communicate with. And sometimes this is not possible, or it is possible only to a very limited degree.

III. Para-social interaction

Almost half a century ago, in an essay first published in 1956 in the early days of television as a form of mass media, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl coined the term 'para-social interaction' to describe the way in which entertainment television attempted to provide its audience with the illusion of interaction. In their words:

One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met *as if* they were the circles of one's peers; the same is true of the character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and interesting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*.

(Horton and Wohl 156)

Horton and Wohl point to some of the techniques used to promote such illusions—techniques that have been refined and extended in the half century since they wrote. First they talk of the creation of the 'persona', the individual who is 'familiar and intimate' to his or her audience. In watching such a persona, we are lulled into responding as we might to someone we know well who is there before us, interacting with us. As they put it, most characteristic is “the attempt of the persona to duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering” (Horton and Wohl 158). They also say much about the coaching of audiences, with direct comment by such person about, and to, the watching audience. Here the presence of a studio audience which *can* interact with the performer—although within certain carefully controlled limits, plays a crucial role. As we laugh with the studio audience at the jokes of a man who is staring

straight at us (or even at *me*), we gain the illusion that we are communicating directly with the performer. In so doing we engage in a sort of 'interactive karaoke' with a performer who knows that we exist but who has no direct access to the intensity, sincerity, or even diversity of the responses of this audience outside the studio. We form part of an extended pseudo-audience—'pseudo' because we are not possessed of the power or the presence of an audience as traditionally understood. Of course today even the studio audience with which we identify ourselves may itself be electronic fiction—canned laughter generated without the need for real human beings. But many performers do still rely upon studio audiences, because their 'raggedness' and unpredictability have an important para-social function so far as the mass audience is concerned.

The idea of the model audience was not born with the electronic mass media. The novelist Joseph Conrad was very fond of the technique of presenting his fictions as if they were oral tales told by one narrator to a group of listeners. The reader of a work such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or *Lord Jim* (1900) was thus able to imagine that rather than reading a fixed and unchangeable text, he or she was part of a group of people listening to a speaker talk, and able to respond to what was said. On occasions Conrad even has his narrator responding to an interjection from a listener that the reader has to imagine, as it is not reproduced.

I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day.... Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. (Conrad 10)

That 'you say' indicates a response to something said, an interaction with a listener that may persuade the reader that he or she too is being paid attention to, is capable of influencing what is said. Nowadays we may find such techniques, and other forms of direct address to a reader,

somewhat clumsy and unconvincing. But their purpose is clearly to try to instil in us the illusion of interaction, the sense that we are dealing not with a text that may have been fixed before we were born, but a human source that recognizes our individuality and our humanity.

It is an interesting question whether and why such subterfuges start to be counter-productive. When we walk into a hotel room and the TV screen displays a welcoming message with our name on it, our reaction may include an element of irritation at the attempt to evoke a sense of personal contact and intimacy that we know has been generated by a computer program rather than by a specific willed decision directed at us by another human being. Who has not been irritated by canned laughter on a TV show? As Horton and Wohl remark in their article, “[t]he crucial difference in experience obviously lies in the lack of effective reciprocity, and this the audience cannot normally conceal from itself” (Horton and Wohl 156). Given this, the attempt to create the sense of such things as recognition, intimacy, reciprocity and interaction may be counter-productive, may strike the viewer as a false and even dishonest attempt to claim that which cannot be provided. Because we expect interaction in a normal communicative situation, the attempt to simulate a normal communication situation in automated, impersonal or highly mediated forms of information-provision may call forth expectations that can only be frustrated.

IV. Unresponsive texts

I have now used the word 'text' on a number of occasions, and I would like to spend a little time talking about some specific problems associated with texts. Terms such as 'text' and 'sign' are used in a number of different ways and I am not going to join the long line of authorities who have attempted to provide distinct watertight

definitions of these two terms. But I have no doubt that we share a rough understanding of the way in which signs become meaningful. You are also no doubt familiar with the distinction between motivated and unmotivated signs—between those signs that are unmotivated and *arbitrary* and able to generate meaning only when used to generate messages according to the rules of a given sign-system—and those signs that are *motivated* and resemble that to which they refer by duplicating the direct impact that the referent has on one of our senses. There is a particular problem with certain motivated texts that reproduce human communicative behaviour in such a way as to appear to invite interaction while remaining unable to make good this invitation. A classic example of such a text is the photograph, and I would like to move now to say a little about certain distinctive features of still (not moving) photographic images.

Even though we belong to a generation of individuals who have grown up with the photographic image, many of us still find the still photograph—and especially the still photograph of a human being or human beings—oddly disturbing. I write this at a time when the newspapers and the TV screens are constantly bringing disturbing images of the abuse of prisoners in Iraq to our attention, and of course these are disturbing because of what they report, of the reality that is captured by the picture. But such pictures are also disturbing in a way that verbal reports of the same abuses are not. These pictures seem to invite us to respond to them. They show individuals looking at us, apparently meeting our eyes, seemingly forming facial expressions aimed at us, and wanting our interactive response. But our response is not recognized or registered. It is as if we are made invisible, rendered unimportant, treated as a non-person.

This capacity of the photographic image to evoke a response that is ignored, to seem first living and then dead, has been commented upon by a number of writers. The photograph looks like the world, but it

does not behave like it. The world for us—and especially the social world of human beings—does not freeze itself for our unhurried contemplation, does not pose untiringly in front of our searching gaze. And in this respect the photograph, that most realistic of representations, exposes the limits of realism. Realism may provide us with something that resembles the world, but our contemplation of the realistic image or text does not resemble our interactive experience of the world, a world that will not keep still, a world that responds to us (even if that response involves ignoring us) and responds to our response. The photograph is, as the English poet Philip Larkin has memorably put it in his “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album,” “faithful and disappointing” (Larkin 712; the poem was first published in 1954); it frustrates and teases us, makes us conscious of a lack even as its striking verisimilitude seems to guarantee that nothing *is* missing from its representation of a slice of the world. My sensations when looking at a photograph remind me of those of my cat, who, faced with a TV screen full of twittering birds, walked up to the TV set and peered round the back. Holding an old photo, are we not tempted to do the same, to turn it round in search of that supplement that will assuage our sense of something missing? Christian Metz has suggested that it is particularly the still photograph that induces this feeling. As he points out, while film gives back to the dead a semblance of life, photographs, even of the still-living, remind us that ‘the person *who has been photographed* not the total person, who is an effect of time is dead’ (Metz 155-64).

V. Death and the photograph

Metz notes that photography’s “deeply rooted kinship with death” has been commented upon by many writers. According to Eduardo Cadava indeed, “the conjunction of death and the photograph is in fact

the very principle of photographic certitude: the photograph is a cemetery” (Cadava 10). Roland Barthes has written in *Camera Lucida* (1993) about a photograph of a man awaiting execution. Before quoting what Barthes says about the picture it is necessary to give his definition of a pair of terms that he uses in his discussion: *studium* and *punctum*. Writing about pictures of violence and suffering, Barthes distinguishes between photographs that trigger off an average effect, one requiring “the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture.” This effect he refers to by means of the Latin word 'studium'. But there is a more direct, unmediated effect, an 'element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me', which he terms the 'punctum': “A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (*Camera* 26).

Barthes's comments on the photo are much briefer than the definition.

In 1865, young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W. H. Seward. Alexander photographed him in his cell, where he was waiting to be hanged. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*.

(*Camera* 96)

More powerfully, underneath the photograph itself—reproduced in *Camera Lucida* is a caption which begins: 'He is dead and he is going to die....' The caption comes much closer than the text in explaining the haunting quality of the photograph, but it is remarkable that Barthes has nothing to say about the fact that the condemned man's eyes are fixed on the camera lens and, accordingly, apparently on us, meeting our own. Many of the photographs Barthes reproduces in his study depict individuals who are looking straight at the camera, but he has surprisingly little to say about this. For me this apparent

eye-contact is crucial to the frustrating effect of such photographs: it appears to invite an interaction that can never be begun.

Barthes's account reminds me of another photographic image that has had a similar effect on me. In the late 1970s I had to grade a number of student essays that involved the analysis of a visual image chosen by the student him- or herself. One student chose to write about a full-page photograph, taken from a magazine, which has haunted me ever since. It was of a Black man, strapped in to the electric chair, and awaiting execution. From the evidence of the clothes of those around him—who were all White—the photograph was taken early in the twentieth century. The subject was grisly enough in itself, but what fixed the image in my mind and made such a profound effect upon me was that the man in the electric chair was staring straight at the camera and, apparently, straight at me. His face was without any obvious emotion, and the impression he gave was one of dignity, although I am aware that that impression was quite possibly the result of my own reading of the picture, and that the man himself was probably paralysed with fear.

As the image has regularly returned to me over a period of many years, I have attempted to explain to myself why it has haunted me so much. Representations of human cruelty or suffering do stick in the mind, and most of us have, from childhood onwards, experienced that contradictory mix of fascination and horror when faced with such images. But more and more I became convinced that it was the effect of meeting those fixed eyes of the victim in a still photograph that was at the heart of its disturbing power. In a number of different ways this meeting of a dead man's living eyes forced me into endlessly looped cycles of contradictory responses. Meeting someone's eyes normally initiates a sequence of interactions that lead to a sense of shared intimacy, and the image triggered off that expectation in me—only to have it instantly checked: this was an image, not a living human being,

and the man was now long dead. Moreover, in cases where power is not being asserted or aggression threatened, the meeting of eyes typically has a levelling effect. In chapter 27 of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, the now socially superior Pip spends an unsatisfactory day with the still-humble blacksmith Joe Gargery. Joe, 'dressed up' and embarrassing to Pip (who he addresses as 'Sir'), turns down Pip's invitation to him to stay to dinner. But as the invitation is turned down Pip reports that, "Our eyes met, and all the "Sir" melted out of that manly heart as he gave me his hand."

When we are conscious of differences of power or status we avert our eyes, and to maintain eye contact normally betokens either aggression or intimacy. But my instinctive expectation of intimacy when faced with the photograph was shockingly inappropriate in a situation where the man in question was being treated not as a human being but as an object—indeed, was very shortly to be transformed from living human being to inanimate object. More strongly, perhaps, I felt that although the photograph situated the viewer—myself—in a position of symbolic power, and the man in a position of impotence and inferiority (he was actually physically lower than the level of the camera lens), his gaze reversed that position, making me feel challenged and condemned by his accusing eyes.

One of the many intertwined responses that the photograph evoked in me was that sense of the added horror of being present at and complicit in the execution of someone whose gaze was directed at one. It is not for nothing that acts of execution typically require that the victim be hooded or masked, so as, one presumes, to spare or shield those conducting the operation. One impulse that I felt strongly in action to the photograph was that of wishing to avert my eyes to avoid the man's gaze—as one does when stared at by a living person—and yet being unable to do so, feeling held by the challenge of his look.

The relationship of power-viewer: impotence-viewed was reversed, such that I felt disempowered and shamed by the man's gaze.

Another strong response that the photograph called forth from me was a strong sense of a lack of closure—although the poor man in the picture of course did not have the luxury of such a sentiment at the time the photograph was taken. But one of the effects of a representation, and especially of a mechanical representation such as a photograph, is to present as frozen moment that which is experienced existentially only as movement and sequence. Roland Barthes is correct to note that “the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (*Camera* 4) but to this needs to be added the rider that such mechanical repetition lures us into responding as to an existential reality. Thus although intellectually we know that a photograph artificially freezes movement and process, a 'still' photograph of a person looking at the camera nonetheless overrides our knowledge and gives the impression of a fixed, staring gaze. Faced by those unblinking eyes it was impossible to remember that this was an artificially frozen fragment from a temporally fluid progression: all my interpersonal training and instinct responded to the photograph as a person whose gaze was not fixed by the camera shutter but by a deliberate decision on the part of the man photographed. At the same time, however, on a more intellectual and distanced plane what I was—am—unable to escape from was the knowledge that when this man raised his eyes, what was presented to him was not another pair of eyes but a camera lens. It is an illusion, after all, that the man in the photograph is looking at us. He is, was, looking at a camera, one held (we can be sure) by another White male. Could he at such an extreme moment ever have thought of those who, looking at the photograph being taken, would one day after his death meet his apparently living eyes?

As I have said, moving films do not produce this same complex of eerie—uncanny—responses on the part of viewers. One of the reasons for this is that even when a human being is filmed looking straight at the camera, the movement captured by the camera can be interpreted as interaction. We do not get that same disturbing feeling triggered by the still photograph that the person represented is *waiting* for something from us while simultaneously *refusing to acknowledge* our presence and our reactions. When we watch a moving film and a human being appears to catch our eyes as he or she glances at the camera, the effect is one of complicity and intimacy, rather than the estrangement and challenge that is generated by being looked at by a person in a still photograph. As Roland Barthes puts it, 'the cinema is not an animated photograph; in it the *having-been-there* vanishes, giving way to a *being-there* of the thing' (*Forms* 34). Thus a *sequence* of still photographs tends not to have the same unnerving effect that a single picture does: the successive shots help to convey that sense of response and to induce a fictive appearance of interaction that reassures us. We are no longer being *stared* at, and the stare evokes very deep-rooted feelings of unease and discomfort in us. As Jonathan Cole reminds us, "Grown-ups rarely gaze in each others' eyes without speech for more than a few seconds, unless they are about to fight or make love" (Cole 112). In a difficult but rewarding comment, Vivian Sobchack sums up some of the contradictions and paradoxes with which we are presented by the still photograph.

Although the image has a presence, it neither partakes of nor describes the present. Indeed, the photograph's fascination is that it is a figure of transcendental time made available against the ground of a lived and finite temporality. Although included in our experience of the present, the photograph transcends both our immediate present and our lived experience of temporality because it exists for us as never engaged in the activity of *becoming*. Although it announces the possibility of becoming, it never

presents itself as the coming into being of being. It is a presence without past, present, future. (Sobchack 59)

This is not to say that the photograph does not prompt us to *expect* it to 'become': '[a] still photograph does not behave rather, it waits—as a vacancy—for us to possess it' (Sobchack 61). But however hard we try to effect this possession, the photograph keeps on waiting. Thus although Susan Sontag has claimed that to photograph is to “appropriate the thing photographed,” and to put oneself “into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge and, therefore, like power” (4), it only *feels like* knowledge and power, and that not for long: the photograph eludes us, taunts us, looks down on us.

In their study *Gaze and Mutual Gaze* Michael Argyle and Mark Cook point out that while 'a common effect of staring eyes is physiological arousal', “[t]he cut-off of gaze may be used and interpreted as an appeasement signal” (Argyle and Cook 2). Moreover, they point out that 'it is only in the primates and man that gaze functions as an affiliative signal: in all other species gaze is primarily a signal for aggression, particularly in inter-species encounters' (Argyle and Cook 4). The unflinching eyes of a human being in a still photograph, then, serve both to challenge us and to signal a need for affiliation—but our strong need to respond to these messages, to determine whether we are being challenged or invited to explore intimacy, cannot be satisfied. Whatever we do, the same complex invitation to respond will continue as if we had not already responded. We get a description of a comparable response in Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*. Early on in this novel the young Oliver is put in a room in which there is a portrait of his own mother—although he does not know that this is who the portrait depicts. As a result of his fascination with the picture he is asked whether he is afraid of it. “Oh no, no,” he replies,

'but the eyes look so sorrowful; and where I sit, they seem fixed upon me. It makes my heart beat,' added Oliver in a low voice, 'as if it was alive, and wanted to speak to me, but couldn't.'

What this sort of response reveals, I think, is that the fixity and unchangingness of representations such as photographs and paintings colours or scrambles our interpretations: intellectually we know that the portrait has a fixed expression because it *is* a portrait, but our learned skills of interpersonal interpretation interpret such unchangingness in terms of the depicted subject's behaviour.

Photographs of the soon-to-be-dead, then, fascinate partly because this unique subject matter exposes something that is intrinsic to the photograph and to 'photographic' forms of realism. And poets concerned to evoke a sense of what is lost in early death have been drawn to write about just such photographs. Ted Hughes's wrenchingly powerful 'Six Young Men' is a poem that gnaws away at many of the paradoxical and contradictory responses evoked in us by photographs of the now-deceased. The first verse reads:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well, —
 Six young men, familiar to their friends.
 Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
 This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.
 Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
 Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
 One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
 One is ridiculous with cocky pride —
 Six months after this picture they were all dead.

By the fourth and final verse the poet concludes:

To regard this photograph might well dement,
 Such contradictory permanent horrors here
 Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
 One's own body from its instant and heat. (Hughes 54-5)

Note the characteristic bringing together of a number of elements here, especially intimacy and death. But the phrase 'contradictory permanent horrors' is also interesting, with its ability to isolate the tension between the unchanging nature of the photograph ('permanent') and the shifting between opposites perhaps affiliation and challenge but certainly life and death ('contradictory'). Some lines from a later poem by Jon Glover entitled 'Our Photographs' reach out at something of the same complex of opposed feelings.

All that's left is what you don't want
To see.. The picture won't care for you.
What we composed and framed, beyond death,
is your worthless trash, like history. (Glover 49)

VI. Conclusion

In a communicative situation we expect interaction. Interaction means more than that we are provided with information, or that the information we proffer to others is received by them. It means that a constant process of responding to the information that is transmitted is entered into by the two or more participants in the communicative situation. Thus in an ideal communicative situation we are constantly adjusting both our responses to the other and our understanding of the other's understanding of ourselves. We may have a script, but it is a script in which the lines are being written and rewritten all the time.

Communicative situations that encourage us to entertain an expectation of interaction while failing to satisfy this expectation are experienced as highly frustrating. Extreme examples of non-reciprocity—the spy, the voyeur—are not only treated as outcasts and as pariahs, but serve as models of a betrayal of the unwritten contract that lies behind human communication.

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Abstract

Communication: The Expectation of Interaction

Jeremy Hawthorn

The article builds on what Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1968) refer to as ‘the impossibility of not communicating’. Using a brief extract from George Eliot’s 1871–72 novel *Middlemarch*, I argue that in an interpersonal communicative situation in which interaction is expected, the attempt to not-communicate is inevitably interpreted as a form of communication, producing a ripple-effect that effects transformations in successive behavioural moves.

Although this example is concerned with interpersonal communication in a dyad, much of our internalized communicative ‘script’ is based on early conditioning through the learning of culturally specific interpersonal communication conventions. Moreover, very often other forms of communication mimic, or are parasitic on, learned interpersonal communicative conventions. I next consider the influential 1956 article by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl entitled ‘Mass communication and para-social interaction: observations on intimacy at a distance’. In this article Horton and Wohl argue that much popular television attempts to convey the illusion of an intimate interpersonal relationship between performer and viewer. They term ‘this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship*’. The article suggests that the pretended intimacy may be seen through by the viewer, and I argue that because the proffered illusion of intimacy encourages the expectation of interaction, the technique may well end up being counter productive.

Finally, I turn to a similar process that I argue characterizes our relationship to the still, but not the moving, photograph. Because many still photographs present individuals and particularly their faces in ways that mimic interpersonal communicative self-presentation, at a less than fully conscious level they lead the viewer to expect to be able to interact with the depicted individual. It is, I argue, for this reason that there is something frustrating about such photographs, a frustration that is connected to the association between such photographs and death that has been commented upon by a range of theorists.

Key words: gaze, interpersonal communication, interaction, television intimacy, photograph