



History of Photography, 16:4, pp. 398-400 (1992)

Stieglitz, Martin Buber, and The Equivalent
Kenton S. Hyatt

Photographic images are capable of providing both creator and viewer with a highly aesthetic, intellectually stimulating, emotionally charged, ineffable experience. However, that potential may be very limited. The quality of the relationship starts with the intent and attention of the photographer and viewer respectively, where both must be able to draw on similar referents, similar emotional responses, and similar aesthetic assumptions about interpretation. To the degree that parties in the communication process share similar intentions in understanding images, I submit that images can be transcendental equivalents.

The Stieglitz equivalent is an affective abstraction, where the subject represented in the image is secondary to the relational characteristics between the photographer and the creative experience. John Szarkowski indicated that since there was no way to directly test Stieglitz's claim that the equivalents represented his most profound experiences, we should have to take them at his word.¹

If that is completely true, the equivalent must remain completely outside our grasp of understanding. However, my thesis is that the equivalent as Stieglitz described it may yet be a useful communication vehicle. I do not think it necessary to attempt to explain what specific images as equivalents mean, but by applying the I-Thou communication model of Martin Buber, I believe that the intensity and the potential power of such photographic image might be understood. Buber developed the well known models of interpersonal relationships, the I-It and the I-Thou. These models provide a description with which to compare Stieglitz' approach to the equivalent as a visual communication. Like Stieglitz, Buber stresses the relational qualities of the communicative experience over the content of the image or the message. As a first principle, Buber held that we are first and immediately involved in these two basic types of relationships.² His belief was that the basic human desire is human interaction and is centered in dialogue. For Buber, dialog is the essence of being human and it rests in the establishment of the I-Thou relationship.³

The first type of relationship, the I-It, embodies all the characteristics of empirical perception and objectification. The I-It focuses on the establishment of casual links between people, or, between the environment and the perceiver. It stresses

observation, reason, separation of the individual from reality, and focuses attention on the accuracy of observation to validate the truth of sensory information. It operates as the cultural excuse for interpersonal communication. As the norm, attention is turned away from the quality of the communication relationship to sensory information and its validation. In short, I-It relationships are usually used to provide validity for one's own perceptions.⁴

The contrasting I-Thou identifies a transitory relationship that requires mutuality, directness, presentness, (immediacy), emotional intensity, and ineffability.⁵ All of the characteristics in the I-Thou lead to an emotional bond between the participants. The relationship is confirming, not necessarily approving, but is a trusting type of interpersonal relationship.⁶ The basic assumptions that describe these two types of relationships are reflected in their respective communication structures that are further identified in given media. The relational structure of the I-It is a subject-to-object monologue. It is limited to and by empirical dependence. By contrast, the relational medium of the I-Thou is the dialogue. The dialogue encompasses a diversity of specific media from intuition and silence to verbal speech and to art.⁷ The role of art (Buber strongly implied art to mean image) in the I-Thou is to function as the 'between', the medium that allows and maintains the relationship between artist and viewer. The 'between' as medium of the relationship, whether image, verbal statement, or another analogous channel, continuously indicates the quality of relationship in which it is being used.⁸ The 'between' is not always benevolent. It acts as the equivalent of the intensity and the reciprocity of the I-Thou, or in the case of the I-It, as a barrier to the participants. I believe that for both Stieglitz and Buber it is the quality of the communication assumptions and attitudes of the participants and not the type of image that accounts for the difference.

The final characteristics of the I-Thou also help to describe the work of Alfred Stieglitz in terms of commitment and spontaneity. The participants of the I-Thou must be committed to the relationship in a non-evaluative manner. The I-Thou requires genuine, non-judgmental acceptance of the other. Dialogue, according to Buber, prevents the action of the presupposition without the participants' reservations.⁹ Immediately evaluative responses in a communication relationship preclude the I-Thou, and automatically involve one in the I-It.

The I-Thou also involves the quality of spontaneity. According to Alexander Kohanski, one's attentions are singularly focused on or turned toward the other. "Through this 'turning', dialogue gains its meaning as 'the mutuality in inner action'. Dialogue cannot be demanded. One is not ordered to respond; one is able to do it."¹⁰

In 1922 Stieglitz was accused of using hypnosis with his subjects to achieve his success. Irritated, he intentionally wet out to create visual statements with obvious, inanimate subject matter, but with such meta-communicative strength as to overcome the secondary, objective content within the frame.¹¹ He described his meta-communicative visual statement as the equivalent:

What I have been trying to say through my photographs seems most clearly communicated in the series 'Songs of the Sky' where the true meaning of the 'Equivalents', as I have called these photographs...come through directly, without any extraneous or distracting pictorial or representational factors coming between the person and the picture.¹²

Evidently, Stieglitz believed the power of the visual relationship could overcome even representation itself. Achievement of that power relied on an emotionally charged image that represented a significant, subjective experience for the photographer, where symbolic content and emotional intensity operate in harmony.¹³ Paul Strand described the equivalent in terms that are archetypal in quality:

He [Stieglitz] meant that in the abstract relations of these shapes, tones, and lines, he was expressing equivalents of human relationships and feelings...They contain feelings of grandeur, of conflict, of struggle and release, of ecstasy and despair, life and blotting out of life.¹⁴

Stieglitz implicitly depended on an implicit cultural symbology to provide a common interpretive, emotional context for viewers. The traditional dichotomy between photographs as objective documentation and photographs as statements of artistic expression that had governed the use of photographs since the early years of the medium did not provide a useful structure for Stieglitz. By contrast, the equivalent was used as a channel for multi-leveled communication that involved the viewer in the creative process through participation in the image with the same qualities that the photographer had in its development.

I-Thou types of communication relationships are dynamic. Complex, and transcendental. For Stieglitz, the equivalent depended partially on the nature of the medium, the aesthetics of the content, and particularly on the relational qualities of the photographer and viewer. His overall objective in the development of the equivalent was

a confirming relationship, which for him, as well as for Buber, represented truth. “A yes to one’s yes, a no to one’s no, that is truth, one’s release... it takes two to make a truth.”¹⁵

The properties of the visual I-Thou or the equivalent are the qualities of intensity and commitment, a holistic perception that depends on a suspension of immediate evaluation, and reciprocity.

Intensity and Commitment: The development of the equivalent began with the identification of a powerful emotional state between the photographer and subject. That emotion must be transferred eventually to the viewer by using the symbolic capabilities of the image:

When I am moved by something, I feel a passionate desire to make a lasting Equivalent of it. But what I put down must be as perfect in itself as the experience that has generated my original feeling of having been moved.¹⁶

Stieglitz explained that in regard to aesthetic, interpersonal relationships the quality of the relationship between him and the image would mirror the relationship between him and the subject. “All art is but a picture of certain basic relationships; an *equivalent* of the artists most profound experience of life.”¹⁷ The intensity with which he approached his work (as with most of his life) is well known:

If what one makes is not created with sacredness, with wonder; if it is not a form of lovemaking; if it is not created with the same passion as the first kiss, it has no right to be called a work of art.¹⁸

“When I photograph, I make love...”¹⁹ To do less than this would be to engage in an I-It, objective exercise, characterized by Stieglitz as distant and empty, being “mental and not real.”²⁰ Buber explains that the I-It is typically characterized with a lack of relational commitment. The I-It flees responsibility by escaping into a general collective attitude, or into a self-centered attitude that ignores commitment.²¹ Stieglitz, however, required a willingness for total commitment. “If one cannot lose one’s self to something beyond one, one is bound to be disappointed.”²²

Holistic perception: Stieglitz’s credo was, “If you do not see all of it, you do not see any of it.”²³ He recognized that the equivalent contained a high degree of implicit information, and that the iconic image would not necessarily reveal to the viewer what the photographer’s intended message was. Only a holistic perception, recognizing the iconic, technical, and symbolic characteristics of the image could support the aesthetic interpersonal relationship that he sought with the viewer. He did consider the iconic

nature of the image, and absolutely depended on it as a cultural index for successful communication. Indeed, form was the principal concept identified in the images as having relational capabilities, the potential to carry the implicit.

Maurice Friedman has explained that the I-It focuses on reductive categories, and that each allows an evaluation. The I-Thou requires a suspension of the judgment that will allow such integrative recognition and avoids setting up boundaries as evaluations that result from categorical organization.²⁴ For both Stieglitz and Buber, holism includes the relational potential as well as the specific message and communication event.

Reciprocity: The assumption of reciprocity was basic for Stieglitz: "We automatically evoke in others a precise equivalent for what we project."²⁵ When shared, this assumption allowed the feelings of creation to be shared by the viewer. Buber would have qualified the automatic quality but agreed with the availability of the I-Thou. By his own admission, Stieglitz indicated that technical expertise was not sufficient to make an equivalent. What was it, then, that allowed the assumption of reciprocity? It was the development and sharing of *his* type of image code. The ability of the viewer to act as a literate receiver of the message, not in just the general sense of literacy but in a very specific sense, rather restricted to Stieglitz's own aesthetic community.

Establishing an intentional I-Thou imposes great relational demands on the viewer, the image, and the photographer, However, even with these formidable limitations to achieving a transcendent visual dialogue, the following example show that Stieglitz felt that he was successful with the equivalent as a transcendental medium:

I wanted a series of photographs which when seen by Ernest Bloch, (the great composer) he would exclaim: Music! Music! Man, why that is music! How did you ever do that? ... And when I had my series of ten photographs printed, and when Bloch saw them -- what I said I wanted to happen, happened *verbatim*.²⁶

Stieglitz employed and expected relational development through the equivalent. He carefully de-emphasized but by no means ignored the normally obvious iconic qualities of the image. At the same time, through careful control of image syntax he was able to invite the viewer to project himself or herself into the image. He recognized that the average photograph was characterized by routine, the major characteristic of Buber's I-It. Stieglitz was less tolerant of that quality than Buber, however, viewing most of them with contempt. As a photo-editor he had a stamp made with which to reject photographs

that did not exhibit the emotional commitment he required: Technically perfect,
Pictorially rotten."²⁷

Notes

¹ John Szarkowski, *American Landscapes*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981, 13.

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, , translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, 53-5.

³ Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, New York: Harper and Row, 1956, 66.

⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 63.

⁵ Maurice Friedman, Introductory Essay, in Martin Buber, *Knowledge*, 12.

⁶ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald G. Smith, New York: Macmillian, 1969, 10.

⁷ Buber, *Between Man*, 14, and *Knowledge*, 65.

⁸ Buber, *Knowledge*, 112.

⁹ Buber, *Knowledge*, 87.

¹⁰ Alexander Kohanski, *An Analytical Interpretation of Martin Buber's I and Thou*," Woodbury, New York: Baron's Educational Series, 175.

¹¹ Dorthy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer*, New York: Random House, 1960, 143.

¹² Quoted in F. Richard Thomas, *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz*, Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois Press 1983, 11.

¹³ Thomas, 45.

¹⁴ Thomas, 10

¹⁵ Dorthy Norman, Introduction to *An American Seer*, New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1060,46.

¹⁶ Norman, *Introduction*, 39.

¹⁷ Norman, *Introduction*, 35.

¹⁸ Norman, *Introduction*, 34.

¹⁹ Norman, *Introduction*, 35.

²⁰ Norman, *Introduction*, 34.

²¹ Buber, *Knowledge*, 108.

²² Norman, *Introduction*, 42.

²³ Norman, *American Seer*, 14.

²⁴ Friedman, in Buber, *Knowledge*, 20.

²⁵ Norman, *American Seer*, 125.

²⁶ Norman, Introduction, 27.

²⁷ Norman, *American Seer*, 42.

History of Photography, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter, 1992, pp. 398-400.