

Research Paper

INVESTIGATING THE GAP BETWEEN THE CAMERA AND THE SUBJECT

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“Finally his hand moved, the fingertips of his right hand touching his chin, and then slowly, like an insect, crept up his face. I suddenly realised I was doing the same thing. As though *I* were the reflection of what was in the mirror and *he* was trying to take control of me.”

- Haruki Murakami (Murakami, 2006: 72)

## INVESTIGATING THE GAP BETWEEN THE CAMERA AND THE SUBJECT

### INTRODUCTION

A recent road trip around Europe got me thinking about why we behave the way we do in front of a camera. Frida has the same side smile, hand on hip, pupils cheekily hanging on to the corners of her eyes, Cassun with his I’m-so-cool-and-I-know-it look, Roosevelt in his thoughtful, wannabe-candid, I’m-completely-unaware you’re-taking-a-picture-of-me pose and Joss’s I’ve-stopped-texting-long-enough-to suck-in-my-gut-and-smile moment (Figure 01). It took me less than two days (out of the 15 days) to tire off our ritualistic photo taking, so much so that the only truth I saw in my images were the lifeless stone buildings and numerous cathedrals they were posing against.

To me, the most challenging aspect of photography is getting an honest reaction from a subject. I had started to view my camera as a real pest. The moment I had it at eye level, everyone changed. It is an impulse that has evolved into an instinct where the mere sight of a black box with a lens produces a chemical reaction in the brain so

strong as to warrant a change in form and content. The process is almost as mechanical as the workings within the camera itself.

In my work I have attempted to connect two basic principles; identity and appearance. Here I use the word 'identity' as a synonym to identify my subjects. Who are they? However, in the process of answering this question I have realised that in my images they are without identity. My subjects are people without personalities. They are common. They can be anyone. John and Jane Doe. They have no quality that sets them apart from the generic brand. This anonymity of identity places an even greater emphasis to the second aspect of my project, i.e. appearances. Here I have used the word 'appearance' to mean not their physical attributes but in the way they dress and fashion themselves to fit within a social framework. The key to their identity is therefore in their appearance. What they appear to others. It thus became very important that the clothes reflect the personality of the subject.

In an earlier attempt to relate my work to a literary source I wrote a paper on 'What sort of evidence do photographs supply?' In it, I looked at the work of Christian Boltanski. His installation 'Detective' has particular importance to the question of identity. The subjects photographed were either criminals or victims but with no information provided about his subjects, Boltanski leaves us in the dark about which ones are the criminals and which were the victims of the crimes committed.

Such is the power of the camera that it sees without prejudice. At the same time the Camera as a presence cannot be without bias, if only in the way it changes the nature of the subject and therefore the truth. Here again there is a marked distinction between 'the camera' and 'the Camera'. The first, being an instrument of truth and the second, being an entity that distorts the truth by its presence. The camera has no personality. It is a machine that records. It is an apparatus that functions on the basic laws of physical science. It is a box with an aperture that allows the light to make an inverted image onto a medium that captures the information and records a scene. As a device, the camera has a claim on truth like non other. The Camera, however, right from its invention has inspired in its subjects the act of performance. It stands in place of the viewer / audience, reflecting their every unforgiving and judgemental gaze upon the subject. As such the Camera becomes the audience. It carries within its physical space

an awareness that comes directly from the subject's awareness of the Camera and how they are perceived by it. Every photographer has heard the words, 'shoot me from this angle' from his subject at one time or the other. It is the Camera that is responsible for this confusion between perception and perspective. In this paper I have therefore treated the camera not as a physical box but as an entity with intelligence and have used the capital C to denote it as such.

In this paper I will explore how the subject relates to the presence of the camera. I will endeavour to understand this relationship in an attempt to investigate ways in which this impact of the camera on the subject can be manipulated in order to dodge the instinct to escape from self-identity and morph into someone else. But first I have to understand why this phenomenon occurs. In other words why we behave differently in front of the camera.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE MIRROR : REFLECTION AND REPRESENTATION

The word 'reflection' is significant to my project. There are three ways in which it bears particular importance to my work. Firstly from the basic physical image reflected off a surface. Secondly, the way we reflect on our image be it in the mirror or in a photograph. Thirdly, the reflection of our self in others, and vice versa. We learn from this study of self and we memorise our reaction for future use. It is in this respect that the camera and the mirror as physical objects become instruments for shaping the behaviour of the subject. An understanding of this process of learning 'how to be' or in the case of photography, 'how to behave' is why I have constructed parallels between the mirror and the camera. Especially with digital technology, viewing one's image as soon as the camera has registered it has taken the camera much more closer to becoming a reflective surface or rather a surface to reflect on.

Every year on the feast of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, our parish would organise a fair on the church grounds. We had the usual Roller Coaster, Ferris wheel, Well of Death, numerous rides, food stalls and souvenir shops and of course there was always the Hall of Mirrors. I would walk along a narrow corridor lined with grotesquely distorted mirrors and for only 5 rupees I'd see myself in several different forms; tall, short, fat, thin, with a huge bulbous head, etc. A bargain price, if you asked me.

But this very simple and fundamental act of looking into a mirror and trying to identify with the reflection within becomes something complex and convoluted.

The reflection in the mirror is therefore one of the most significant elements of psychological growth. At six months, an age before an infant has mastered the ability to crawl or learnt how to use its strength to prop itself up against a chair or table leg, it has already recognised the image of itself in the mirror. Jacques Lacan has identified this phenomenon in the psychological growth of a child as the 'Mirror Stage'.

“The human child, at an age when he is for a short while, but for a while nevertheless, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can already recognise his own image as such in a mirror.”(Lacan, 2002 : 93)

The child looking at itself in the mirror both identifies and alienates itself from its specular reflection. This identification is born out of a curiosity that is rooted in a basic question ‘What is this?’ not ‘Who is this?’ The child looks at its reflection as an object; as a whole. But at the same time its physical shortcoming and inability to coordinate its basic motor functions forms a contrast with its whole image in the mirror leading to a fragmented identification of self and therefore an alienation from the reflection.

“Indeed, this act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of a monkey, in eventually acquired control over the uselessness of the image, immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates – namely, the child’s own body, and the persons and even things around him.” (Lacan, 2002 : 93)

This *prematurity* is a key developmental milestone in the identification of self.

But as we grow, our image in the mirror does more than just form our identity. It shapes the way we see ourselves in the context of our environment. It forms our personality. In the privacy of the bedroom, for example, it reveals duplicity akin to having a clone. We are more open to inspection and more accepting of both our strengths and our flaws. I remember hours spent in front of the mirror, imitating a rock star in my hot- pink tights and a bed sheet tied around my neck as a cape, strumming my badminton racket and jammin’ to the blasting stereo. Yet I could never pull off a stunt like that in a crowded mall. In a public space, we tend to be more critical, focusing on our flaws, trying harder to hide or mask them. It reveals a different image of self - one that is aware of multiple versions of self, seen through multiple eyes. It is similar to standing in a room full of distorted mirrors, like at the fair.

These social mirrors are the most influential personality developing tools surrounding us day in and day out. We learn from them. They teach us how to behave, how to dress, how to communicate. The mirror, however, is no longer objective. It draws from our own biases. Am I too fat? Am I too thin? Should I wear more makeup?

“The function of the mirror stage turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality- or, as they say, between *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt* ” (Lacan, 2002 : 97). (Innenwelt refers to ‘inner world’ whereas umwelt refers to ‘environment’ or ‘surroundings’)

Not unlike the mirror in the fairy-tale, we constantly look to our reflection in the mirror in an attempt to define us. What we see in the mirror is no longer a physical reflection but a psychological interpretation of self. This is the key difference between the mirror and the Camera that I will discuss in the following chapter. But in all other intents and purposes the Camera and the Mirror are similar in the way they push us to react to and reflect on our appearance.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CAMERA AS A MIRROR : THEATRICALITY vs ABSORPTION

The camera functions exactly like the mirror but on an inverse plane, where the physical image in a photograph is the opposite of the mirror image. The ideology of the image however, remains the same. We are bound by the same psychological rules conceived by *I*. What do *I* look like?

This discrepancy of the mirror image goes unnoticed as we are so used to our mirrored self. For example I had a mole on my left upper lip. My left hand would automatically point to it as my brain had registered that movement as familiar. However if I were asked on which side of my face the mole was, my mind would be confused as I've only seen it on the right side of my face in the mirror. Only by lifting my left hand to feel the irregular bump would I be able to give its proper location.

The camera's intelligent mirror nullifies the mirror affect by flipping the image just before it is captured on film or sensor. Even the handy phone camera with its front camera will flip the image before you view it. It therefore breaks away from how we see ourselves (in the mirror) and becomes how others see us (through the lens). This is a key distinction between the mirror and the lens.

This awareness of self is therefore multiplied by the presence of the Camera to include, - what do I look like? And also what do I look like to others? Herein develops the concept of being *beheld* by others. The Camera goes beyond being just a reflection of self and becomes a window to self. It is a medium through which others can look at us. It exposes the vulnerability of the subject and as such, the subject becomes an object and the camera, an object becomes subjective.

The Camera is the only other object that has the same effect on the subject as the mirror. I can't recollect a single time I have looked into a reflective surface and not had the urge to check myself out. But like the protagonist of Murakami's story, the reflection is never a true copy of self. And neither is the person in the photograph.

A photograph is a performance much like my cape and tights clad rendition of ‘I want to break free’ in front of the mirror. It is a projection of self, aiming to be at it’s best. One that shouts, ‘Look at me. This is who I am’. I have countless photographs dressed as an angel for fancy dress day in school with white paper wings and a silver cardboard wand. Looking back I can’t remember dressing as anything other than that. Perhaps it was my father’s orthodox belief that if I was dressed like one; I would indeed act like one. It may have worked too, if he had continued the tradition well into my teens. But I can’t help acknowledge the fact that growing up, my personality was reinforced by this yearly performance. Even others who saw these photographs agreed that I was the perfect angel. It wouldn’t be enough only to dress as an angel but to be repeatedly photographed as one that has more significance in this case. The photographic quality of repetition is a driving force behind this reinforcement. It is a constant reminder as compared to the fleeting moment in a mirror. The camera’s ability to capture and freeze a moment and thereby lengthen time has a lasting impact on the way we see ourselves over time. Baby pictures, birthdays, anniversaries can last forever never really changing and yet constructing a timeline that is driven by change.

“...the subjects are fully aware of themselves and conscious of how they present themselves to the camera (and for the image)” (Fried, 2008 : 202).

A code of conduct is implied every time the subject is faced with the camera. Theatricality of this kind puts an enormous pressure on how the Camera *sees*. A weight that is transferred from the subjects need to be *seen* differently.

“...the hallmark of all these figures – awareness of the artist taking their portrait, of the fact that they are a subject to be looked at, and, by extension, of their place in the world once the shutter has fallen” (Fried, 2008 : 202).

Michael Fried’s investigation into (mid nineteenth century French) paintings highlights similar issues of the sitter’s awareness of being *beheld* by the painter. (Figure 02) In contrast, it was the painter’s concern “that the portrait as a genre was singularly ill equipped to comply with the demand that a painting negate or neutralise the presence of the beholder” (Fried, 2008 : 193). A growing need to tackle this

problem led to sitters being painted gazing into the distance or absorbed in an activity in an attempt to give the impression that the artist has stumbled upon a scene rather than constructed it.

With respect to painting and photography in the early 1930's right up to the invention of digital camera in 1990's, the amount of time invested in the process of capturing an image was crucial. Even though the sitter in a painting is aware of being painted or a subject, of being photographed, it would only be a matter of time before their mind would wander away and they would indeed subconsciously unwind and relax and thus be less aware of the task at hand. Mona Lisa, for example, within five minutes of sitting for Leonardo Da Vinci, was probably thinking of what needed to go on her grocery list or mentally checking what chores needed to be done once she was back home. She may even have dozed off occasionally. Da Vinci probably had to snap her back into attention, which would account for that famous smile.

This brings me to the key issues of Absorption vs. Theatricality. How and why do the subjects change when they are aware of the Camera and when they are unaware of it? And how the Camera's presence can be manipulated to get anti-theatrical images?

One of the ways of doing this comes directly from painting, i.e., by stretching time. In many ways it's simply a case of misdirection. Rineke Dijkstra has used this device of lengthening the process by using a 4x5 to photograph subjects for the series of beach portraits (Figure 03 & 04) to get similar results. The time it takes to set up a photograph with the 4x5 has given her and her subjects time to acquaint themselves with the camera and compose themselves. It gives them time to reflect on their stance but at the same time it is long enough to let their attention drift off and slowly but surely we can tell they have loosened their stance. The more successful ones in that respect are the ones in which the subject has shifted his or her weight onto one side with an expression less alert than the others almost as if they are impatiently waiting for the click of the machine. Thus even though the directness of the gaze is present and there is eye contact with the lens, Dijkstra has stretched their attention so as to make it thinner and transparent, in a way poking holes into the outer self and letting the inner self spill out. Although achieving complete unawareness would have taken much longer, but it is undeniably impossible with the gaze directed to the lens.

An excerpt from an interview with Jan Estep in 2001 reveals Dijkstra's intentional choice of subjects:

“Estep: What is it about children or adolescents that you like to photograph? Are they less self-conscious than adults?

Dijkstra: Yes. Their appearance is more abstract to me.

Estep: Abstract?

Dijkstra: When somebody becomes older they have a personality that distinguishes them from others, but with teenagers it is more...

Estep: They're not sure yet who they're going to become?

Dijkstra: It's like an open book or something. Their lives can go in all direction: they are not completely filled in yet” (Fried, 2008 : 211)

Dijkstra goes on to say she disliked her earlier magazine and newspaper work owing to her subjects knowing “exactly how they wanted to be seen, with a specific stance, a certain look”(Fried, 2008 : 211)

She maintains that it was important for her subject to ‘concentrate’ on the camera. They would have to be attentive long enough for her to take the pictures she wanted. And in the amount of time that passed the attention is shifted from what they wanted her to see and was focused on listening intently for the shutter to release. She speaks of it in terms of Arbus's “gap between intention and effect”. A gap between what the subjects wants to reveal and what is subconsciously revealed.

Bettina Von Zwehl constructed a series of photographs in three parts, which “portrays subjects when their appearance is not controlled by them” (Cotton, 2004 : 31) (Figure 05 & 06). By photographing her subjects firstly minutes after they've just woken up from sleep, secondly, just after a rigorous workout when they haven't had time to catch their breath and thirdly under strain after she places herself above them as they lay on the floor, she attempts to catch her subjects off guard and unprepared.

Although Von Zwehl's subjects are photographed squarely facing the camera, they are still under the effects from being in a different state of mind and are not

completely in control of their appearance, thus allowing the camera to slip between the conscious and subconscious self. We see a play between the theatrical setting and a sense of tension yet at the same time there is a marked distance between the subject and the camera. We get the sense that something has occurred before the shutter was released but are not privy to what has occurred and as such the connection with the subject has been severed.

At first glance, Thomas Struth's (Figure 07) family portraits seem devoid of any theatricality. We have groups of family members gathered in a familiar space among people they are have been around and interacted with all their lives. There is genuine familiarity. There is no awkward pretension. But a closer inspection makes us feel uncomfortable. So how can we account for that feeling of strangeness and tension? Is it because we experience a sense of intrusion on a private and intimate space? As outsiders we are not welcome. The closeness of the group seems to project a feeling of being fenced out. An invisible, transparent wall between the subject and the Camera like an exhibit in a museum with a warning 'Do not touch' hung around it.

The "two complementary axes" (Fried, 2008 : 202) in Struth's photographs sheds light on the dynamics of this phenomenon. Fried speaks of the lateral axis that lies within the photograph and defines the relation of the subject to the environment and the people in it, whereas the orthogonal axis (or "the axis of address" (Fried, 2008 : 203)) is directed outward from the image towards the viewer or audience. We see absorption in the way they interact between each other characterised by a sense of unawareness and theatricality in the way they interact with the camera again characterised by the complete awareness of the Camera. Each family member within the group is composed to portray their particular role in the family and is therefore in an act of performance purely for the benefit of the Camera.

Struth reveals his process of taking these family portraits as not an act of randomness and spontaneity. He was very particular which families he chose to photograph and more importantly he spent more time getting to know and befriend them before he introduced them to his Camera. Time again plays an important role. He took steps to ensure that the process of photographing his subjects was long and repetitive. He

purposely used a 4x5 camera, which allowed him to stand by it and not immediately behind it, looking through the lens.

“There is ... a difference in making a portrait with a large negative-format, with a focusing scree, where the photographer stands next to and not behind the camera. The portrayed don't fall into illusion that they are looking at the photographer. The individuals being portrayed look into the lens and know exactly what it means to be photographed: that in this particular moment they project a mirror-image, without actually seeing themselves” (Fried, 2008 : 197)

The longer shutter speed set on the camera forces the subjects to freeze their stance and features. The game of 'L.O.N.D.O.N. Statue' comes to mind. One child would stand at one end of the room and turn his back to the others (standing at the opposite end of the room) and spell out London which signalled the others to run as fast as they could across the room and tag the child before he turned around and cried 'Statue'. At which all the others would have to instantly freeze in a pose. Anyone who was caught moving was sent back to the starting line. Being caught in the Camera's gaze has a similar freezing effect on its subjects.

In Thomas Struth's family portraits as well as Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of adolescent teenagers on the beach, the subjects are photographed over a period of time. They gave the subjects time to concentrate on Camera and their awareness of its presence. In effect relaxing the subject and making them inadvertently lower their guard. The repetition desensitizes the subject making them more readable.

It is a very different experience when the photographer is the subject. Like a director playing an actor in his own film, his vision is much easier to translate because he is aware of what he wants captured and how to present himself to the audience, as he is both behind and in front of the camera. He is both spectator and actor.

Francesca Woodman (Figure 08 & 09) for example, celebrates the all seeing, voyeuristic eye of the camera by performing for it and engaging with it to produce a more truthful, self affirming and at the same time unrevealing work. By taking advantage of the long shutter she both reveals and withholds her self from the camera.

Her images use the element of theatricality to draw the attention of the viewer. But the moving, almost dancing spectre gives one an eerie feeling, pushing the viewer away. She is completely aware of the Camera but her ritualistic movement gives the impression that she is lost in a world of her own. So much so that she makes us break away from our reality and plunges us into her world of fantasy, some would say, madness. The Camera becomes a gateway into her private intimate space.

“I show you what you do not see – the body’s inner force”. (Sollers et al, 1998 : 10)

“You cannot see me from where I look at myself” (Sollers et al, 1998 : 10).

Phillipe Sollers, in his introduction, describes Woodman’s work as a disruption of our sleepwalking way of life. He details the show and drama in her images and compares her to a sorceress; a conjurer of a world cut off from reality.

The reason I was interested in Woodman’s work, besides the theatricality aspect of it, is because of the use of clothing, and more often, the lack of it. In her images there is an obvious conflict between identity and dress. Wearing clothes is a negation of her identity. By photographing herself nude, she is escaping from the bonds of social norms and customs and unmasking herself. But at the same time her rigorous movement with or without clothes suggests that this ‘self’ dissatisfies her. In this sense she portrays the identification and alienation of self in the mirror stage. She gives the viewer a glimpse at a fragmented self. The nudity then becomes just another mask to hide behind which is why when she looks into the mirror; she doesn’t seek to find herself but to find the gaze of the Camera. By keeping her identity hidden she challenges the Camera to define her.

Her relationship with the Camera and therefore the viewer is one of truth as well as obscurity. Her performance is a dance of seduction. In all her images, however, time place an important part. Not technical aspects like shutter speed and time-lapse but the time taken to acquaint her self with the Camera. Woodman’s relationship with the Camera is a long and familiar one, not unlike Struth’s or Arbus’s attempts to befriend their subjects in an effort to find the gap.

## CHAPTER 3:

### RePose

The interplay, between theatricality and absorption, is precisely what I am interested in identifying. It forms the basis for my project 'RePose'.

But in exploring the libidinal relationship between the Camera and the subject I tried to think of ways in which I could merge these two concepts of theatricality and absorption in an attempt to disarm my subjects.

In my series *RePose* I have deliberately asked my subjects to make a conscious choice of dressing up in outfits that they would wear to an occasion or an evening out. But by photographing them sleeping in their beds in the outfits they've picked, I take some of the control back by making them vulnerable to the camera's eye. My subjects would go to bed apprehensive and aware of the Camera focused on them, but eventually they would drift off to sleep, escaping from this awareness, thereby surrendering to their inner self, leaving the outer self behind.

The rationale behind the project is simple. In order to get rid of the self-conscious, awareness of being photographed I had to lure them into a safe place and what better way to do that than to put them in a deep sleep. It was important that the process was drawn out so as to let enough time elapse before the photograph is actually taken. In order to do this, I had to make sure that the timing was perfect and the environment was conducive. I began with scheduling photo-shoots with my subjects in their own bedrooms, at a time when they would naturally set aside for sleeping. This meant that I had to devise a way of being there and not being there at the same time. Thus an enormous amount of responsibility fell to the camera and the program on the laptop that allowed it to sync with the camera in order to take the images in the middle of the night without my supervision.

My biggest fear at this stage was the disturbance to the sleep process caused by the snapping sound of the shutter and the flashing of the studio lights. By using ambient lighting I succeeded in refraining from blinding my subjects but there was still the shutter, which was a gnawing concern. However after the first few shoots, I was

convinced that my concerns were baseless. The resulting images, 50 or so shot within 5 minute intervals of each other, bore witness to the transition from the self conscious or rather awareness of being watched to the unconscious unawareness that I had set out to capture. (Figure 10, 11 & 12)

But there was still something lacking. Where was the theatricality? Where was the oomph? Although these images were meditative and solemn there seemed to be a lack of drama. There was something lacking in aesthetic. I studied the images and realised that the ambient lighting flattened the image, taking away the depth that would otherwise make the figures pop. I decided to bring back the studio flashes and photograph the subjects as objects suspended in time and space and concentrated on getting a single frame that reflected the gap. (Figure 13, 14 & 15)

I also redirected the lens of the camera, so that it no longer came in from the side but from the top. I wanted it to not only create a sense of looking over but also intensify the voyeuristic nature of the Camera to the point of intrusion. In an attempt to bring out the contrast I switched the colour of the sheet from off-white to black. (Figure 16 & 17).

Finally, instead of picking random subjects as I had started out, I have concentrated my interest on Fashion designers. The reason behind this is to amplify the notion 'we are what we wear' (Figure 18). I see the wardrobe as being an extension of self especially for the young designers but more importantly I see it as an 'outside' self; a projection and a reflection of social compliance and conformity. Yet by photographing designers wearing their own designs I want to bring to the surface of the photograph the escape not only from social bonds but also from the bonds we construct for ourselves. In that sense I want each photograph to have layers of skin. Herein lies the factor of theatricality. The simple process of dressing up for the Camera lends an element of seduction, performance and drama.

As for absorption, sleep comes so naturally that no tinkering or interference on my part is needed. Through this project I hope to create a perfect symphony between the two elements and at the same time reflect on the violence of the subject matter, ie bondage and escape from both self and the gaze of the Camera.

“A large part of the mystery of Arbus’s photographs lies in what they suggest about her subjects felt after consenting to be photographed. Do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like *that*? Do they know how grotesque they are? It seems as if they don’t” (Sontag, 1979, 35-36)

## CONCLUSION

Capturing a subject in its true form is much like observing an animal in its natural environment. If it is made aware of the presence of the Camera a wild animal will automatically be alert and attentive to it. Its instinctual curiosity will make it apprehensive. It will cautiously approach and engage the Camera in an attempt to size it up. But when the animal is unaware of the Camera its true behaviour will be captured. In a sense, the animal needs to escape from that awareness to be captured. Similarly, a subject unaware of the Camera would be certainly a much more natural subject.

Photography like anthropology is a study of man and his relationship with his environment and unlike any other man-made tool, the Camera is instrumental in the way we fashion our lives in a social environment. Just like the mirror it goes beyond being purely an object and becomes a concept, a medium and an entity. It challenges us to reflect on our roles both as individuals and as part of a social network in the same way that we reflect on our specular image in the mirror or on the two-dimensional frame of the photograph.

Do I as a subject define the photograph or does it define me? Am I outside the frame? Or am I inside it? Who am *I*?