MIRRORS & REFLEXIVITY

Reflections on the Photography & Anthropology of Youth

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Anthropology and photography have experienced a largely paralleled emergence since the 19th century. Both disciplines, though technically distinct have allowed artists and academics to ask questions and learn about humanity in concordant ways. Notably, during the post-modernist period anthropology and art more generally, shifted the gaze from the "other" to the self. In both disciplines, the writers and artists are driven by a curiosity to observe, question and relay findings about humanity and the human experience. Through a the analysis of my own photographs and a photograph by Francesca Woodman featuring mirrors and adolescent girls, this essay will examine the role photography can play as an anthropological work.

The reflexively of modern anthropology, following the postmodernist movement, is synchronous to the use of mirrors in photography. Considering mirrors as a literal motif and theoretical trope in works focusing on the period of adolescence emphasizes the homologous roles of the lens of photographers and anthropologists alike.

For the past decade, I have photographed my cousin Louise as she has grown from a small child to a sixteen year old teenager. Since long before I had even "grown up" myself, I was fascinated in watching her grow. Through photography I was able to capture the progression of time. I found myself studying her, and the changes she went through, not because

LOUISE OUTSIDE **ELINOR HILLS**

SELF-DECEIT #1 (ROMA) **FRANCESCA WOODMAN**

they seemed foreign or obscure to me, but entirely the opposite. It took me until college, and her teenage years, that part of the reason I found photographing her to be so compelling is that in watching her growing up it was as if I was watching myself grow up. Being six years older than her I had just enough distance to reflect on the subtleties of her age, but we were close enough in age too that I could observe how she grew fill the spaces and roles that I had just moved out of. A couple of years ago it dawned on me that the portraits I made of her were more self-portraits than family photographs; she would play a character and I, as the photographer, would craft a narrative that was reflective of my own experiences. In the past year, I have become transfixed on the use of mirrors in articulating the themes about aging that I was grappling with in regards to my own coming-of-age. I have used mirrors to articulate the psychological, and even physical, grappling with of relationships and relationships with space and place, in a way that I lacked the literary vocabulary to do. Through the use of mirrors and reflective surfaces I have been able to explore the coexistent commonalities and dissimilarities in the experience of the progression of adolescence.

In one of my own photographs Louise is seen standing on the outside of a window. In front of the window is a smaller mirror. In the mirror is a reflection of my mother's arm and torso. The form in the reflection lines up with Louise's body. The image speaks to my interest in the cyclical nature of aging and particularly how this is manifested in youth. The way the two bodies fit together to form one is a reference to how in growing up, while we come into our own, we are still always reflections of who shaped us and those who came before us. In photography, the use of mirrors allows us to see that not only are the subjects artifacts of the past or present but also point to the future.

Mirrors have an inarguably conscious presence in the historical canon of youth photography. Consider for example, the work of Francesca Woodman a young female photographer. Woodman, despite dying tragically to suicide at the age of twenty-two, is renowned for her prolific work on teenage girls, working primarily in direct self-portraiture. Woodman created work from the age of thirteen, through her teenage years. At the time of her death she had already produced an extensive archive of over 500 In her work, Woodman utilizes mirrors extensively. Woodman's image, Self-Deceit #1 (Roma) from the features a young women, Woodman herself, crawling on her hands and knees around a corner and in front of a mirror. The angle of the mirror to the wall behind it creates a distortion and doubling of the subject's torso. The figure in the image is read as as a two-headed creature, crawling out from the shadows on four arms. The subject's hair is braided and pinned up around the crown of her head. She is nude but protected by the wall from behind which she emerges. The square format of the film and the image's exterior frame is reiterated by the frame of the mirror within (Woodman, 1978).

Mirrors in photography, complicate the two-dimensional plane of the page an image is printed on. The uncertainty a viewer feels when presented with a work that is less easily legible or decipherable is reminiscent of the liminality associated with youth. In both Woodman's photograph and my own, mirrors evoke awareness of the dichotomy between "outside" and "inside." This same, inside/outside tension is reflection of the neither-here-nor-there association of youth. Anthropologists have aimed attention at demographics of youth as a way to grapple with the same tension. Teenagers, or adolescents, are not adults and yet not children anymore. In Khan and Rosa's ethnographies, youth within the school systems are seen as vulnerable for exactly this reason, they are in some ways seen as not yet ready for the "real" world but their emergence into it is inevitable. The disruption of the planar frame that a mirror can provides elicits confusion from the viewer in a way that mimics the confusion artists and anthropologists may feel in regards to their own youth.

In anthropology and photography alike, researchers and creators confront reality with the intention to pursue and convey an authentic truth. A photograph can be journalistic, a direct capture of a scene exactly as it occurred, or it can be entirely fabricated. Mirrors break the compositional stability of a photograph, just as reflexivity can, and should, disrupt the assuredness of an ethnographic account. Mirrors add a literal reminder to the viewer that what they are seeing may not be an unequivocal truth; they give reason to question how a scene or interaction can be translated from reality, through a camera's lens and onto a piece of paper. Anthropologists often provide this same reminder, whether through an introduction or methods section, to understand that what they are presenting has first been filtered through their own eyes, brains and belief systems (Trillout, 1991). The mirror reiterates that no matter who the subject of the photograph is, that the story or scene holds no truth in regards to the subject. The "truth" or the message a photograph captures is the one that the photographer is telling. Likewise, in ethnographic texts, regardless of the prominence of firsthand testimony from the subjects of the research, the messages they shared are always posi-

tioned within the anthropologists argument. Similarly to how a snapshot of an actual scene can be manipulated and articulated to have an entirely different meaning, ethnographic "truths" are only truths to the degree that the anthropologist allows.

Photographs use mirrors as a conceptual device too, to remind the viewer of the reflexivity inherently present when addressing the category of youth. Photography and anthropology of youth allow for the observer to revisit their own youth and to ask the questions they had lacked the vocabulary or experience to ask at the time. Anthropologists use their research to return to places that they once knew and perhaps could not fully grasp at the time during their adolescence. Khan for example returned to his high school in conducting research for Privilege. In his ethnography he frequently interjects with memories from his own experience as a student at St. Pauls (Khan, 2013). Bhimull too, while less directly than Khan, returned to concepts from her youth that she felt shaped her as a means to enter into her research on airline travel (Bhimull, 2017). In both disciplines, individuals are driven by the experiences of their youth that they perhaps feel are better prepared to answer later in life. Through more open-ended forms of expression, especially though with the added dimension of reflection, photographers and anthropologists can present information that aligns more with Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling" than they do with public, literary discourses. Williams describes structures of feeling as being, "thoughts felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity" (132, 1977). In other words, the concepts and emotions that are indisputably present, and widely understood, but that exist beyond the realm of common discourse. In art especially, a message that can be unifying and tenable to a large, diverse, population can be shared through motifs and aesthetic devices that stem from individual expression.

The value of a photograph is less in what is being seen but in how it is being seen. This is true in anthropology too. We should be cognizant of, but also see the value in, the act of looking, questioning, and observing and overall, the positionally of the anthropologist. Trillout calls for reflexivity in post-modernist anthropology when stating, "In desperation, the baffled anthropologist burns his notes to create a moment of light, moves his face against the flame, closes his eyes and, hands grasping the camera, takes a picture of himself" (2003, 14). Here, Trillout is speaking of a hypothetical anthropologist but the message is clear. Anthropologists, much like photographers, are often guilty of forcing the emergence of an "Other." As Trillout emphasizes, anthropology needs "sober reflection" and clear acknowledgment of the positionally of the anthropologist. In photography there are means to more physically include the presence of the photographer's gaze. In ethnography, these reminders, usually first person pronouns or interjected personal anecdotes, risk being lost more easily, without a literal presence of a "reflection." Mirrors, even if they fail to present a glance at the photographer and their camera, remind the viewer that the photographer, and a world behind, not in front, of the camera exists.

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There is value when the line between subject and author are blurred too. In anthropology this often occurs when the anthropologist shares much of the background of the the population being studied. While some critics may view Woodman's work as puerile and naive due to her age and the fact that her subject matter was teenage girls. It is possible that her audience may not believe she had had enough of an experience of the world to make such gritty, intimate portraits. They may also criticize her methods and techniques. Woodman's work pushes beyond what many of her contemporaries, and successors, believe to be "good photography." Many of her images are out of focus, her subjects are often blurred as if they are still in motion and occasionally her frame is tilted at an angle or chops off limbs of the subject. The rawness of her style can be read as reflective of a lack of experience (Simon, 2010). This is quite similar to the way critics accused Margaret Mead, a young female anthropologist, of being naive in her approach to ethnographic work in Samoa. Mead is said to have been too trusting and fell for the stories of her young subjects who were fooling around and messing with her. Mead's findings about youth in Samoa have largely been overpowered by the criticism that her positionally failed to allot her sufficient distance from the population she was studying and interfered with the authenticity of the research (LeVine, 2007). Oftentimes teenagers are seen as not having sufficient lived-experience to have their voice heard as a valid part of the broader academic canon. However, it is often those closest to the group being studied that have the most to offer in terms of insight (Mead, 1928). Valuing personal experience and reflexivity can allow for a deeper understanding of specific populations or experiences; so much can be understood from listening from those who may be seen as "other" (Trillout, 2003). Reflection is often the closest and furthest we can get to the "truth."

Reflexivity in the photography and the anthropology of youth is critical because it allows for the work to extend the bounds of the past that contain many other forms of research. Mirrors, can be suggestive of the multi-dimensionality of not only space, but also time. The presence of a mirror connotes both the past, in the fact that it is literally a reflection, but also teeters on the edge of the present and future. Though we know the mirror is in itself a two-dimensional surface it allows an entry point into the frame. This entry point is a passage into another realm. The mirror is a window that is inviting the subject, and viewer, into a new world but one that cannot be entered. And thus, it seems as though mirrors, as reflective surfaces, containing frames, and windows, are inherently connections to the present and past. The mirror is as liminal of a metaphor for youth as youth is liminal in-and-of-itself.

Both Woodman's photography and my own utilize mirrors to present a doubling of reality to signal to the viewers the duplicity of the subject. The doubling of characters in a photograph articulate the idea that the subject who stands alone in the image is not alone. The doubling, regardless of how straightforward or conspicuous, reminds viewers that the photographer is there engaging with the subject. As Nader writes, ethnography is, "an attempt to understand how the people studied see and account for their world, which includes the anthropologist" (2011, 212). Reflexivity extends beyond the anthropologist acknowledging their own position in the work, but also in how the "subjects" of the work view the anthropologist.

Renown photographer John Szarkowski rose the question of the role of the photograph asking, "is it a mirror, reflecting a portrait of the artist who made it, or a window, through which one might better know the world?" (1978, 25). Prior anthropological work transitioning to a period of more reflexivity through the post-modernist movement mimics the shift between "window" photographs and "mirror" photographs. Without reflection, not necessarily literally through mirrors, photographs often are relegated to commercial photographs that find their place in textbooks and advertisements. Without reflexivity anthropology, can easily fall into one of the disciplines early anthropologists were pushing away from such as history and philosophy. Ideally, ethnographic work should be both a mirror and a window, looking out into the world while simultaneously looking inward to elucidate the unique perspective of the individual.

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