

Some Thoughts on “Shadows, Boxes, and Computers”

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May 2015

Part 1: "Shadows"

When a baby looks at itself in the mirror and notices its own reflection as a "version" of itself for the first time, a trauma is said to occur, as the baby confronts the notion that it has an external self, and that it has a body similar to the other bodies it sees in the world. The baby becomes both obsessed and repulsed with looking at it's own body, in a kind of terrified but transfixed way. Like driving by a gruesome car accident or staring at a ghost: the child wants to look away but it can't.

I feel like this is what people are re-living, or trying to tap into, in their "normalized" adult way, when they take a photo of themselves. Taking a photograph of oneself is perhaps about trying to come to grips with that same incomprehensible paradox we experience the first time we notice ourselves in the mirror, which is a simultaneously terrifying and endlessly riveting experience. *Is this really how The World sees me? The World is so much bigger and more powerful than I am. It's not fair. This can't be who I really am . . .What can I do to take the power back?*

But taking a photo of oneself is usually not experienced as traumatic or psychologically disruptive once we become adults. It is usually just experienced as a very every-day, almost mundane act, especially as taking a photo of ourselves has become easier and easier (via smart phones). I think this is because as we grow older, we learn to play down the traumatic/confounding aspects of our every day experience in order to learn to become active members of society, in order to play the game of functionality that is required of us to consume, produce, or do whatever it is that any given society mandates as “normal adult activity”. Professional Artists in this society supposedly have the privilege of getting paid to both experience and give to their audience the experience of at least a glimmer of a space that is both transcendent and terrifying—the same space that a baby inhabits when they see themselves in the mirror for the first time.

I hope that every time we express ourselves, or make a mirror of ourselves (from making a

Facebook status update to just a simple doodle on a piece of paper), there is somewhere in that experience the potential for the same kind of transformative rupture a baby experiences when they first recognize themselves in the mirror. I hope that this rupture is possible to access for all people, not just professional artists or those on drugs.

There is a viral video that I am obsessed with that is a collection of home videos that documents a similarly terrifying yet transformative moment: when babies notice their shadows for the first time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4aTw-zEJZ8>

I am interested in this video because there is a 3rd symbolic entity represented in these home videos, that is not present in the metaphor of a child simply staring into a mirror. This 3rd symbolic entity is a more accurate metaphor for how culture and power works. You have 1) The Baby (representing the individual's subjective sense of self), you have 2) Their Shadow (representing the external or objective image of the individual), and you have 3) The Parents filming the experience (representing simultaneously the care-taker, the authority, and the ridiculer).

This 3rd set of symbolic characters, The Parents (that of care-taker/authority/ridiculer) is particularly interesting in relationship to 21st century digitally networked self-expression: where it feels that with every published post to the internet, one must confront not only those that supposedly care about us (the "friends network" or "followers,") but also the hand of authority (a government/company with un-checked power over your data), and perhaps most interestingly in terms of identity formation: the "ridiculer", the external and internal voice that makes fun of us, that laughs at us, no matter how sincere we are.

The awareness of this entity on the internet is often called The Troll, but I would like to re-name it for the purposes of this writing The Internalized Troll. This symbolic shadow version of ourselves that we carry with us as we navigate the world is thus associatively tied not only to our internal self, and to our external self, but is also tied to an experience of ridicule and to a sense of loss of control over one's self-image. This shadow version of ourselves feels inescapable and out of our control and yet as adults we are supposed to pretend to be in charge of it, or forget it exists

altogether.

Part 2: "Boxes"

After I discovered this Babies Shadow video, I decided, just for fun to type in "babies shadow boxes" into google image search. Boxes are another metaphor I am interested in that can be used to express the paradoxes of fixed identity. I was very excited to find this image, which to me says it all:



This type of object is called a "shadow box." Early shadow boxes came out of military culture and were "simple boxes in which sailors retiring from shipboard service carried their belongings ashore. Superstition held that if the sailor's shadow touched shore before he set foot upon it, he would suffer ill luck. By carrying his belongings, a metaphorical "shadow" of himself, enclosed within the box he could ensure he would touch land before his "shadow."

If a shadow is an inescapable external version of our identity (the copy of us that follows us around even when we don't want it to), then a box is the container that traps this version, or freezes it into a memory, to help us remember who we are, or to tell others who we are, by reminding us and the world who we once were. A "shadow box" for me is a kind of artistically embellished memory-retrieval device that stops time: it's about freezing a moment that might

otherwise be forgotten, and about representing that memory physically.

In relation to networked digital technology: the hard drive that is sitting in a climate controlled room somewhere in the world that is storing all of our Facebook or Instagram photos is a kind of shadow box. This shadow box, sitting "in the cloud" is as physical as an old-fashioned shadow box, it's just using electricity to keep it's memory-retrieval device from disappearing into nothingness.

I want to return one last time to the Shadow Boxes photo reproduced above. The urge to stop the clock at the exact time a baby is born is an interesting one. For me, it resonates as both a kind of commemoration of the beginning of a baby's life, but it also resonates as a memorialization of the death of something else: total freedom. It is similar to the tension in the "Babies Shadows" video: parents or authority figures documenting things for beings who have little control over their own self-documentation in the world. Maybe the moment other people (in this case "parents") begin to memorialize experiences for you, is the moment you begin to be molded into a fixed identity, into a member of society.

For about the first year of life, we don't know or don't understand that people are documenting things for us, that people are shaping who we will become. But not long after we recognize our image in a mirror, or we realize we will never escape our own shadow, the truth begins to set in . . . we are becoming trapped inside a box we will never escape . . . a box much bigger and more complex than any individual can even begin to comprehend. Perhaps one reason the idea of being watched or tracked or studied by the NSA or by Big Data is so troubling is that it resonates to us in relation to these early experiences of being captured (or "trapped") without our permission, before we even knew what documentation was . . . Perhaps to know as adults that there are versions of ourselves distributed on hard drives all over the world feels a bit like those early moments when time was being stopped without our will. If time stops every time something is documented is time stopping more and more frequently now? Is time slowing down instead of speeding up? Is this moment going to eventually last forever?

Ultimately however, as I said before, I think I am interested in these experiences of early identity rupture (the mirrors, the shadows, the boxes) because I hope that we can still experience some echo of the radical aspect of identity rupture as adults, even if just for a split second. I find our use of computers, the Internet and social media as fascinating spaces for this doing and undoing of ourselves, as with each new technology or platform, a different way to possibly experience identity rupture occurs.

It is always fleeting, and may be barely recognizable, but I do believe there are traces of a kind of transformative rupture here and there, if we listen or look hard enough. If we follow the shadows maybe we can catch a glimpse for a moment, in between checking our email and playing Kandy Krush.