

RE-THINKING THE ACT OF POSING IN RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD'S *THE FAMILY ALBUM OF LUCYBELLE CRATER*

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Our ritual face is not the person we really are, but rather
the image we want other people to have of us, our
persona, the mask we wear, the role we want to play.

Marshall Bernam¹

Abstract

This article tries to investigate the nature of the act of posing by departing from an analysis of Ralph Eugene Meatyard's photographic work entitled: "The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater". It mainly reveals the paradoxical aspect of the act of posing by foregrounding the fact that posing is both an attempt of a protective (self-)image-creation as well as an act in which the subject is reminded of the impossibility of representing, grasping and securing its "self". Departing from Meatyard's photographs that criticises the codes of self-representation in family album photographs, this work claims that the paradoxes inherent in the act of posing makes it an act of representation questioning the relationship between the subject and its image.

Key words: Pose, (self-)representation, mimesis, simulacra, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, photography, subject, image.

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¹ Marshall Bernam quoted in Tannenbaum, Barbara. (1991). "Fiction as a Higher Truth: The Photography of Ralph Eugene Meatyard". *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: An American Visionary*. New York: Rizzoli, 43.

Özet

Ralph Eugene Meatyard'ın "Lucybelle Crater'ın Aile Albümü" Adlı Yapıtında Poz Verme Eylemini Yeniden Düşünmek

Bu makale, fotoğrafa poz verme anını, Ralph Eugene Meatyard'ın "The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater" (Lucybelle Crater'ın Aile Albümü) adlı fotoğraf serisinin analizinden yola çıkarak incelemektedir. Makalenin vurguladığı başlıca öge, poz vermenin, bir yandan, öz-imge, öz-kimlik yaratma çabasından kaynaklanan bir durum olduğu, diğer yandan da bu çabanın imkansızlığını, yani benliğin tümüyle temsilinin, anlaşılmasının ve korunmasının imkansızlığını vurgulayan, paradoksal bir an olduğudur. Başka bir deyişle bu makale, Meatyard'ın, aile fotoğraflarındaki öz-temsiline kodlarını ortaya koyan ve eleştiren fotoğraf çalışmasından yola çıkarak, poz verme anının, özne ve imgesi arasındaki ilişkiyi sorgulayan ve bozan paradoksal bir an olduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Poz, (öz-)temsil, mimesis, simulacra, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, fotoğraf, özne, imge.

We may start by looking at a photograph, as if one is contemplating by curiosity another's family album: a photograph that belongs to the last photographic work of Ralph Eugene Meatyard entitled "Lucybelle Crater & 20 yr old son's 3 yr old son" (Figure 1). In this photograph a woman and a child are standing next to each other in an autumn landscape. The pose of the woman, kneeled down at the level of the child and holding him in an explicit manner (as if she is afraid that he would escape if not hold) reminds us of the familiar poses of the family members in album photographs, because of the exaggerated and forcedly intimate relationship the woman is seemingly trying to establish with the child.

However there is something strange that disturbs our reading of this photograph since we are presented with individuals wearing grotesque masks. The woman, who looks young by her body, wears a mask of an old woman, while the child wears a transparent mask of an old face whose gender is ambiguous. These masks, like any other mask hide the face wearing them, and expose another, frozen and alien face.

The presence of the masks seems to imply on the one hand, that the subject facing the camera is alien to its "self" and to others. On the other hand, it reveals the artificiality of the moment of facing the photographic camera, by emphasising the fact that the posing subject wears or holds onto an artificial identity at the moment of the pose. It seems thus that this photograph is also about the moment of being photographed, the moment of facing the camera in which the subject is so easily assume a pose, acting an identity and creating a self-image.

Indeed, the act of posing whether it is in the artistic realm or in everyday life can be considered as an act of creation of an image, an act where one tries to compose an image of oneself for the sake of identification and recognition. In other words, at the heart of the act of posing lies the desire to appropriate one's image, to frame one's subjectivity in order to be looked at (and thus approved or constituted) by the social gaze.

While posing, the subject transforms itself into a frozen image, imitating, projecting an image of him/herself on his/her body, in order to constitute, to create an identity. However, this attempt of creating a self-image, is also quite paradoxical. Departing from the previous photograph and continuing with the other photographs of Ralph Eugene Meatyard's "The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater", this study will try to analyse the act of posing to reveal its paradoxical nature in the representation of the "self".

The photograph we previously analyzed belongs to the final photographic series of Ralph Eugene Meatyard entitled "The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater" (See also figures 2 and 3). He began this series before he learned he had cancer but most of the work was done during his two-year long illness. One who looks again and again at these photographs can hardly overcome the feeling of disturbance coming from the existence of the masks that are consistently repeated throughout the whole work, even though the bodies wearing them changes.

Each of the photographs of the series is composed of a pair of people, mostly Meatyard's wife Madelyn, with one of his friends, family members or Meatyard himself. What is also important is that each photograph is entitled (unlike in the photographs of family albums) and in each title there is a repetition of the name "Lucybelle Crater". In figure 2 for example, the title is: "Lucybelle Crater and her bearded brother-in-law Lucybelle Crater". This repetition of the name "Lucybelle Crater" seems to exaggerate the familial tradition of naming the members of the family with the same name. It also blocks the individuality of each member.

In fact, according to Barbara Tannenbaum, Lucybelle Crater is not just a random selection but was adapted from a short story entitled "The life you safe may be your own" by Flannery O'Connor whose writing Meatyard greatly enjoyed (Tannenbaum, 1991:49). In that story, an old woman introduces herself and her daughter as Lucynell Crater and for Tannenbaum this may be a female version of naming one's son junior.

Thus, the repetition of the names in Meatyard's "The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater" is empowered by the repetition of the masks that seem to disregard the family members' individuality. In addition to that, these photographs also reveal a desire of repetition that manifests itself in the form

of the familial names and masks and that is also inherent in the act of posing in general. In other words, these photographs might also be pointing out some specific characteristics of the act of posing, namely its seemingly imitative and duplicative nature as well as its alienating aspect. To see the possibility of such an argument more clearly, we need to analyze the act of posing more in detail.

It seems at first sight that, posing is an act of image creation. Kaja Silverman argues for example that the pose is the way the subject offers him or herself to the social gaze, already in the guise of a particular picture and she adds that there is an anticipatory congealing of the body confronted with a real or metaphoric camera into the form of “pre-photographic-photograph” (Silverman, 1996:202). Thus according to Silverman, while posing, the subject whose body becomes as rigid as a statue is imitating the codes of the photographic image.

Indeed, as also argued by Craig Owens, the posing subject approximates the form of a photograph in the sense of arresting the body, letting himself to be a part of a *mise-en-scene* and exaggerating the effects of all photographic representation. “What do I do when I pose for a photograph” Owens asks. “I freeze, as if anticipating the still I am about to become; mimicking its opacity, its still-ness; inscribing, across the surface of my body photography’s ‘mortification’ of the flesh” (Owens, 1992: 210).

This mimicry that happens during the pose is thus not just a mirroring of any particular image but an act of becoming and behaving like a frozen image, assuming thus something “other”, (something different, more rigid, frozen, and dead), than the fluid self/body. In that sense we can also consider the act of posing as an act of alienation from the “self”. This alienation is indeed very well described in Roland Barthes’ famous book, *Camera Lucida*, as he says: “I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (Barthes, 1981:10). It seems thus that there is something paradoxical in the act of posing because it both constitutes and shuts the feeling of subjectivity.

In another paragraph from *Camera Lucida*, Barthes is pointing in an explicit way to this paradoxical aspect of the pose: “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art...and each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of unauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares)” (Barthes, 1981:13). In other words, Barthes’ suffering in front of the camera comes from his feeling that, at the moment of the pose, he is as if decomposed, multiplied into several images, none of which is really himself.

Considering this, we can argue that the act of posing is an attempt of constituting a “self” but through a stepping out from or transformation of one’s body into something that is different from what he/she experiences as the self, a frozen image or a statue like rigidity for example. Such an act constitutes a paradox because, the posing subject, although tries to reach a more stable, definite, recognisable and affirmable sense of “self”, is however experiencing the opposite of his/her desire, and is reminded of his/her own plurality and otherness. Therefore, we can argue that there are two aspects of the act of posing. On the one hand, the act of posing is an act of protection from loss, ambiguity, and the death of subjectivity through a creation of a (self-) image that momentarily prevents the subject’s awareness of its own plurality and fluidity. On the other hand, it is also an act in which the posing subject is constantly reminded of the impossibility of such a protection.

In the first case, while posing, the subject has a desire to get attached, to fit into an identity. He/she attempts to become one with the image he/she believes to have of his/herself. This attempt might also be considered, as an attempt to overcome and deal with the nature of the “self” that might be something always more unbearable than a rigid, stable image. In that sense, the act of posing might be considered as a mimetic act, especially if we consider mimetic representation’s cathartic aspect.

If we look to the conception of *mimesis* in philosophical texts, we can see that *mimesis* has been both criticised for its alienating aspect from the truth, but also valorized for its cathartic effect. In Plato’s *Republic* for example, *mimesis* is the faculty of imitating that prevents us to know the things as they are. Starting with Homer, Plato argues that any kind of imitator, such as a poet, a painter or an actor, has no worthwhile knowledge of the things they imitate. He also tells that imitation is a way of deception that weakens our capacity of rational thinking by providing us with fake pain and pleasure and thus taking us away from the truth (Plato qtd in Russel, 1972:91).

However, for Aristotle *mimesis* is something natural and necessary for one’s education, as he says:

Mimesis is innate in human beings from childhood—indeed we differ from the other animals in being most given to *mimesis* and in making our first step in learning through it...This we can see from the facts: we enjoy looking at the most exact portrayal of things we do not like to see in real life, the lowest animals for instance or corpses. This is because not only philosophers but all men, enjoy getting to understand something, though it is true that most people feel this pleasure only to a slight degree; therefore they like to see these pictures, because in looking at them they come to understand something and can infer what each thing is (Aristotle qtd in Russel, 1972:94).

Aristotle seems here to give importance to the potential of *mimesis* to teach and to make us familiar with things that in reality we will not be able to confront, such as lowest animals or corpses. In that sense *mimesis* provides us with an experience of catharsis and it is only through such an experience that we can know things otherwise so unbearable to experience. So, when we look at mimetic representation we can see that it is helping us to know or to understand better the things that we cannot bear to face or experience in real life. Therefore mimetic representation is making us familiar with things we are afraid to face, by at the same time providing us with a sense of distance and/or protection from these things.

In other words, mimetic representation has a cathartic aspect because it can both deceive and take us away from reality, but also teach about the reality by turning the pain of the real tragic event into the pleasure of being at a safe distance from it.

I believe that this aspect of mimetic representation is indeed present in the act of posing. While posing the subject tries to inscribe his/her "self" into society, by assuming and performing a gesture, an image, a stare acceptable or recognisable by other members of the society. He/she identifies him/herself with that image. However, through this attempt of image creation, the posing subject creates also a metaphorical mask (explicit in the case of Meatyard's photographs) creating a gap between what he/she experiences as him/herself and the image he/she exposes to others.

In other words, the posing subject tries to hide itself behind the pose and this hiding permits him/her to protect his/her subjectivity from collapsing, decomposing, multiplying and becoming ambiguous, "other" and alien. Therefore, the act of posing is an attempt of protection from loss, otherness and alienation through an appropriation of an image or a state of being, as oneself, in order to be recognized and approved by the society. The pose can thus be considered as a curtain that hides our complicated, fluid, paradoxical sense of being from our own consciousness. In other words, by hiding ourselves behind our poses, we might get away from our own and unstable being. The pose is thus a cathartic act of *mimesis*, protecting us from experiencing the loss, the insecurity, and the ambiguity of what we call the "self".

If we return to our analysis of Meatyard's photographs in the light of this information, we can say that, through the repetition of the masks and the name Lucybelle Crater, these photographs seem to criticise the standardisation and the foundation of human subjectivity by the gaze, in Western culture. One of the ways through the subject is constituted in western society is indeed by a standardization of the family members and relationships. As Marianne Hirsh argues in her text "Masking the subject: Practicing Theory", identity in Meatyard's images is no longer individual but

defined by the mask of familial relation and photographic convention (Hirsh, 1994:117).

However, on the other hand, these photographs not only make these conventions explicit but also ironically comment on them. If we look at the way these images are composed, we can see that profiles are rarely used since it is believed that the entire faces show family resemblances more clearly. But the fact that there are masks on the faces, mocks with our desire to find resemblances. Hirsh argues in that respect that, "The album mocks the search for 'lineage' by giving us not facial resemblances but the sameness of the two masks echoed in the sameness of the Lucybelle's name"(Hirsh, 1994:117). In addition to that, I believe that these masks mock with our desire to be inscribed in the society through the act of posing. If we consider these masks as posing faces, we can see that they stand for rigid appearances constituted in order to be looked at and to be apprehended. But the fact that those masks present exchangeable and even ridiculous faces also reminds us the vain attempt of the pose in creating stable subjectivities.

By showing explicitly how the act of posing is a desire for affirmation by the social norms, Meatyard's photographs expose to the protective desire that motivates the act of posing, as the act of posing is driven by a desire to be affirmed by the social gaze that secures the subject's identity and recognisability.

However even though there exists a protective desire behind the act of posing, one might also note that posing is also an ambiguous act of self-representation. For Silverman posing is very close to mimicry since, like mimicry, the pose is a way of putting ourselves into the "picture", that is the social scene. While opening up the concept of mimicry, Silverman refers to Roger Callois, who, by examining the disguise of the crustacean called *Caprella* in its environment, argues that the mimicry performed by the *Caprella* is not merely for protective reasons but represents its attempt to become part of a particular "picture". For Silverman, like *Caprella*, the human subject's attempt to assume a pose is a way of putting or inscribing him or herself into the cultural picture.

However, unlike the *Caprella* example, the picture does not need to pre-exist the act of mimicry since the pose can conjure the picture into existence all by itself. In other words, when we pose we are not assimilating ourselves into a pre-existent environment but we create a picture, a scene around us.

If the pose is not an imitation of a preexistent, definite image but rather a representation of the codes of a picture, an enactment of the structure of a picture, then it becomes a kind of empty signifier. To exemplify this, we can look at another photograph of Meatyard's series entitled "Lucybelle Crater and her bearded brother in law" (Figure.2).

The two masked figures of this photograph are performing a familiar pose. Indeed the act of bending on a car (in a spoiled way) can remind us of some frames from the 1960's movies where cars were important signifiers of adventure, wealth and prestige. Related to that, the poses of the figures are also reminiscent of the poses in car advertisements where a woman in general presents the car as if it is also like her, an object of desire. Lastly, the way the woman and the man are bending on the car as if putting a claim on it, and the way the man points its index fingers to the woman in the form of a gun, creates a tension between them.

They look as if they are trying to possess the car. This fake scene makes the photograph look like a photograph from any family album where the wealth of the family is wanted to be shown by the presence of the car. However, what is remarkable in this analysis is the impossibility of tracing back the referent of these poses. We just have an impression that those poses remind us something, that is however not easily localizable or clear. The poses of these individuals are thus not imitating any specific postures of any specific individuals, but rather, perform an act that is consciously or unconsciously inscribed in the ways we present ourselves to others, something that we have seen and assimilated, something that nevertheless remains unique in its very repetition.

The second and most important characteristic of the act of posing is its simulative aspect. As it can also be observed from the analysis of the previous photograph, it seems that posing is neither an act of imitation, nor of reduplication. What we imitate while posing is ambiguous. Is it really us, or someone else? Or perhaps we don't imitate anything but we constantly create something new. In that respect, the act of posing seems to be very close to what is described by Jean Baudrillard as *simulacrum*. For Baudrillard, *simulacrum* is not an act of referring or imitation but is a generation of a real without origin or reality. What is important in *simulacrum* is that it can endlessly defer its referent to the point of blurring the difference between referent and imitation (Baudrillard, 1983: 96). This is similar to what happens when we are no longer able to distinguish ourselves from our pose, despite its alienating aspect or when we realize that our pose is a kind of repetition without a referent. To understand this better we can look at Figure 3.

In this photograph we can recognize a typical positioning of husband and wife in front of their house. The husband is standing in a protective way in front of his wife, with his hand put on his waist. The shadow of the photographer falling on them is as if justifying the protective pose of the husband. All these recognizable aspects fall into ambiguity when we are reminded by the mask and the title that these individuals are not the same as their pose and that the referent of their pose is very ambiguous. Moreover,

together with this impossibility of coming into a definite conclusion, there exist also a blurring between the pose and what it “pose”, in other words, the pose and what it brings forth.

The pose as a frame that inscribes us into the society is perhaps not distinguishable from what it frames. Since the place of inscription of the pose is the body, the pose cannot exist without the body. In other words, the pose never appears as itself. It is always mediated. In that sense, the pose is in-between ourselves and our image or appearance and it cannot be distinguished from neither of them.

In this state of in-betweenness, the pose works like a paradoxical frame, a frame that while framing, it de-frames something else, it puts something out of the frame. The nature of this “something” remains however ambiguous: it can be our own experience of our “self” that is always fluid and changing and thus cannot be framed, or it can be the “other” within ourselves that we do not want to let it appear because of the fear of risking our recognisability. Whatever this “something” that is left out of the frame is, the paradox of the pose is a paradox of the frame.

This paradox is perhaps best described in Derrida’s book *The Truth in Painting*. Although Derrida seems in his book to escape to give an explicit account of the frame, he nevertheless describes the paradox of the *passee – partout*, that is a structure cut out of a square of cardboard and open in its middle to let a picture appear. This frame within frame structure, made to hold pictures, has a characteristic that is very close to that of the trait (*le trait*). For Derrida, the trait has an ambiguous existence as he argues: “A trait never appears, never itself, because it marks the difference between the forms or the contents of the appearing...it begins by retrac(t)ing (*se retirer*) itself.” (Derrida, 1987:11).

Similarly, the *passee-partout* is a structure that “without ceasing to space itself out, it plays its card or its cardboard *between* the frame, in what is properly speaking its internal edge of what it gives us to see, lets or makes appear in its empty enclosure: the picture, the painting, the figure the form, the system of strokes and of colors”(Derrida, 1987:12).

It seems thus that both *passee-partout* and the trait make things appear by retracting themselves. They both make things appear by hiding themselves. It is in that sense that they constitute an invisible in-betweenness, that is similar, to the in-betweenness of the pose. Like the trait or the *passee-partout*, the pose is not so clearly visible in the sense that it cannot be detached from the subject posing. However it is also that which makes the subject appear. While the posing subject exposes a certain identity by his/her pose, he/she also feels a state of in-betweenness, between himself and his image, as well as an impossibility of matching with his/her pose.

This characteristic of the pose makes its securing character questionable, since, at this stage of in-betweenness the subject can also find a space of questioning his very attempt of appropriating his image.

The act of posing can be considered as an act where the subject desires to appropriate its own appearance by recognising, approximating its “self” into an image. It can also be considered as an attempt of creating a stable and controllable image of human subjectivity. It is not only a moment where subject tries to resemble an imaginary “self” but also a moment in which he/she appropriates his/her appearance in his/her immobility. However an analysis of the pose that takes into consideration its paradoxes can open up a space of criticizing its security. Departing from Ralph Eugene Meatyard’s photographs, that seem to put a claim about this paradox, this article tried to foreground the paradoxical characteristic of the act of posing and revealed that it is a moment in which the subject is also reminded of the impossibility of representing, grasping and securing its “self”. In other words, this essay claims that the paradoxes inherent in the act of posing makes it an act of representation questioning the relationship between the subject and its image.

Although this article seemed to focus more on the relationship between the pose and the photographic camera, I think that such a possibility of questioning the pose exists in other instances of the act of posing, which I think can be a good field of inquiry for further research.





LIST OF FIGURES

1. *Lucybelle Crater & 20yr old son's 3yr old son, also her 3yr old grandson-Lucybelle Crater*, c.1969-72. Image reproduction in Barbara Tannenbaum (1991). "Fiction as a Higher Truth: The Photography of Ralph Eugene Meatyard" *Ralph Eugene Meatyard: An American Visionary*. New York: Rizolli.
2. *Lucybelle Crater& her bearded brother-in-law Lucybelle Crater*, c.1970, *ibid.*
3. *Lucybelle Crater & Eastern man's fried, Lucybelle Crater*, c.1969-72, *ibid.*

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