WEEKEND *VIEWER*

PERSONAL ESSAY

Look at Me, Look at Me

Selfies, Spectators and Social Media.

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

In the 2017 documentary, "I am Heath Ledger," Ledger's family and friends filled a significant amount of the biographical picture with footage that the late actor had filmed of himself on various cameras.

"He got this camera, and he didn't know what to do with it other than to make something," Trevor DiCarlo, Ledger's childhood friend, said in the documentary. "It wasn't just to film us and film what we were doing. He was, like, creating something straight away."

Ledger used his camera largely as a self-teaching exercise, DiCarlo explained. In the shaky, intimate footage recovered from his personal video files, viewers are invited to watch Ledger experimenting; he records his face in the mirror, from the side and from above.

The late actor evidently had a recording habit — his camera seemed both an extension of himself and a vehicle for exploration. Whether that exploration was confined to the medium of film, or extended inwards to become an exploration of himself, we cannot know.

I cannot recall precisely when or how I came across the documentary on Ledger. What took root in my mind was a single sequence: Ledger filming himself as he spins around the room. I was fascinated by the idea of photographing and recording myself — acts I once averted for fear both of being perceived and of seeming self-indulgent in a way that bordered on narcissism. Yet Ledger's videography doesn't lend credence to either anxiety. He does not appear to film himself for an audience, nor to elevate himself as a subject of attention. Rather, Ledger seemed to record himself specifically for himself. It appears as a somewhat purist union between film and an examination of the self.

In the age of social media, this purity seems radical and rare. Self-documentation, and the act of turning the camera on oneself, is hardly ever conducted in private.

Even if our footage goes nowhere and remains buried in TikTok drafts or Instagram archives that will never be made public, there is a subtle catering to the potential spectator who may come to view it, should we dare to provide them with access. To film oneself is now to inadvertently anticipate the gaze of another. The lens is no longer a mere mirror, but a stage for performance.

Perhaps, however, this was always the case. Whenever I ponder my relationship with my camera — which has indeed become an extension of myself — I tend to reference Susan Sontag's "On Photography" as a baseline. Admittedly, the essay collection sparked much of my interest in such contemplation over the summer, and my viewpoints on it are ever-evolving.

PHOTOS BY REETI MALHOTRA



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In "Photographic Evangels," Sontag suggests a dichotomous view of how the self and photography are intertwined. Some may view the act as a means for the self to "master reality" in an "overwhelming world" by anthologizing it visually.

That is to say, the photographer infects the images they capture with their viewpoint of reality.

Others, however, contend that photography serves as a means of "finding a place in the world (still experienced as overwhelming, alien) by being able to relate to it with detachment," as Sontag puts it.

That is to say, the photographer captures things as they are, but does not shape the version of reality that they collect with their comprehension of it.

So, the big question emerges: did Ledger aim to capture himself as he was, or as he understood himself to be?

Any answer to this question — which I do not have — in turn begs another: when we capture ourselves for a potential audience, do we conduct an exploration of ourselves as Ledger seemed to do, or do we merely perform such an exploration?

It is no secret that I have an affinity for social media. I photograph and publish my life extensively on my Instagram account; it is a collage of the things I enjoy, the people I care for, the moments I would like to remember. I like the act of posting — I wouldn't do it if I didn't, I often tell myself.

But at times, the awareness of the ever-present external spectator proves exhausting. In those moments, I toy with the idea of going offline for good. My self-expression shall be conducted in private, I conclude.

But can it ever be? Is it possible to remove ourselves from the external viewer, when, by virtue of being in a community, we find ourselves being perpetually perceived anyway? I cannot escape the feeling that if I decided to stop crafting the image of myself for an external audience, I would less remove the image of myself from their eye than I would just remove my own authorship of it.

Perhaps my questions are unfair or tedious or unnecessarily pedantic. I did say, after all, that we cannot know for certain what Ledger's motivations were as he filmed himself — nor his expectations for what would be done with the footage he accumulated. I can imagine, too, that anyone reading this might argue that it simply "isn't that deep." People post to share slices of their lives and images of themselves. It's straightforward.

Yet I fear that, in simply accepting that conclusion, we discount the evolving relationship between ourselves, the camera and the unavoidable expectant viewer wrought by the era of social media. It is indubitable that capturing the self affects self-conception. And when we bring in our potential spectator — who consumes and comprehends what we show them — we face another conundrum. How do we make sense of ourselves while simultaneously performing for someone else?

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

MAKING TRAVEL SCRAPBOOKS