

The Camera's Lies: Role-Playing, Posing and Imposture in the Self-Portrait

Photography of Monique Pelser and Samuel Fosso

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This paper considers the self-portrait photography of two contemporary African photographers – Monique Pelser and Samuel Fosso. At first glance there is little to link the two overtly. Fosso was born in Cameroon in 1962 but has spent most of his life in the Central African Republic. His interest in photography was sparked by a brief apprenticeship to a studio photographer in 1975; thereafter Fosso opened his own photography studio at the age of was thirteen. Since the first international exhibition of his photographs in Mali in 1994, Fosso has participated in several exhibitions including *Africa Remix* (Johannesburg Art Gallery).

Whereas Fosso has no formal training as a Fine Art photographer, South African Monique Pelser, born in 1976, is a recent Rhodes University MFA graduate. By her own admission, Pelser is 'an educated, white, middle-class South African woman with no physical or emotional adversities' (quote from her unpublished MFA thesis). Her MFA exhibition, *Roles*, was shown in Grahamstown, Johannesburg and Cape Town, and was also the subject of an article by Sean O'Toole in a recent issue of the journal *Art South Africa*.

Despite their differing circumstances both photographers seem to share an affinity for role-playing and identity swapping that marks an interesting proximity in their self-portrait photographs. In a series from 1997 Fosso role-plays different 'types' in a myriad of guises: he is a rocker, an African chief, a lifeguard, a pirate, a lady of the bourgeoisie, a golfer, a sailor, a businessman, and a liberated American woman. Pelser's exhibition, *Roles*, is not unlike Fosso's 1997 series in that it comprises fifty photographs of Pelser role-playing various vocational 'types': she is a postman, farmer, butcher, bicycle mechanic, undertaker, head nurse, deckhand, child minder, security guard and so forth.

Both photographers articulate an interest in staging themselves as 'other', a practice effectively summed up in Fosso's assertion that: 'in all of my works, I am both character and director. I don't put myself in the photographs ... I borrow an identity' (interview with Schlinkert 2004:25). In Pelser's photographs the 'borrowing of identity' happens in rather literal terms. To arrive at the photographs on *Roles*, Pelser literally swapped clothes and places with her subjects. After interviewing her subjects and photographing them in their work environments, she dressed into their clothes and she posed as them, mimicking their poses and gestures. They, in turn, wore her clothes and pushed the button on the camera to photograph her.

The result, in both bodies of work, is arguably a conception of (self-) portraiture that problematises our expectations about the ostensible given-ness of identity. It is this aspect of both Pelser's and Fosso's photography that the following discussion seeks to address, with the intention of elucidating, also, some of the issues at stake in photography's contested link to notions of truth. Underpinning my argument is the assertion that both Pelser and Fosso may be seen to critique the strategies of representation through which identity is figured, imprinted and shaped, particularly with regard to the bureaucratic processes of grouping individuals into 'types', and photography's own complicity in these far-from-neutral processes.

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Richard Dyer defines the 'type' in literature as 'any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or "develop" ... and which point to general, recurrent features of the human world' (Dyer 1993:13). For Dyer the activity of ordering individuals into 'types' 'has to be acknowledged as a necessary, indeed inescapable, part of the way societies make sense of themselves' (Dyer 1993:12), a sentiment echoed by Stuart Hall: 'without the use of *types*,' says Hall, 'it would be difficult, if not impossible to make sense of our world' (Hall 1997:257). By way of illustrating his point Hall offers the following example: 'we "decode" a flat object on legs on which we place things as a "table" ... In other words, we understand "the particular" in terms of its "type"' (Hall 1997:257).

Hall's rather benign example belies the complexities and value judgements at play when the 'particulars' being 'decoded' belong not to tables but to people (a set of issues he does admittedly get to elsewhere in his discussion). Indeed one might argue that the (Western) bureaucratic and administrative systems eager to harness the possibilities of early photography legitimated themselves precisely by assuming such a guise of neutrality and objectivity, in other words, precisely by treating people as tables and recording them as such. In terms of such classificatory discourses, to cite John Tagg: 'the working classes, colonised peoples, the criminal, poor, ill-housed, sick or insane were constituted as the passive ... objects of knowledge ... incapable of speaking, acting or organising for themselves' (Tagg 1993:11).

Correlatively, the rhetoric of photographic documentation during the nineteenth century is 'one of precision, measurement, calculation and proof' (Tagg 1993:11). The photograph's ostensible status as an objective, accurate and depersonalised record rendered it indispensable to the vast range of pseudo-sciences participant in the mapping of humankind. Thus photography was pivotal in the type-casting and controlling of an endless

array of 'others', particularly along the lines of race, class, gender, criminality and disease as primary indices of deviance from the 'norm' of healthy, upper-class, white, masculinity.

Composite photographic portraits, such as the multiple-exposure prints made by English scientist Sir Francis Galton in the 1880s and 1890s, exemplify this characteristic nineteenth-century interest in the 'typical' as well as the desire to justify type-casting by locating it within the register of science. Galton's successive overlapping of the portraits of 6 family members, 23 royal engineers, 15 sufferers of tubercular disease, 12 criminals, and so forth, is premised on, as much as it performs, the reductive operations by which complex individuals are grouped according to the hallmarks of 'type'. In Allan Sekula's words:

Each successive image was given a fractional exposure based on the inverse of the total number of images in the sample... Thus, individual distinctive features, features that were unshared and idiosyncratic, faded away into the night of underexposure (quoted in Lury 1998:53).

Despite the highly questionable nature of this enterprise, Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin and the founder of eugenics, is keen to summon the appropriate scientific rhetoric: firstly, by naming his subjects 'specimens'; and secondly, by referring to his generic images as 'pictorial statistics' (Lury 1998:54).

Such appeals to scientific validity were clearly intended to obscure the insidious ideology at work. Miles Orvell notes that Galton began his portraits at a time when immigrants were viewed with grave suspicion by many in England and America (where Galton enjoyed a considerable following). For Galton and his followers: 'Knowing what they looked like (for it was assumed that all members of a given ethnic group looked alike) would help society defend itself against their potential criminality and radicalism' (Orvell 1989:94).

From these and numerous other examples it is clear that photography's role in the type-casting of certain individuals and groups has not been a neutral one – despite the appeals to neutrality and objectivity often invoked by its proponents. 'Like the state, the camera is never neutral' says Tagg. 'The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own' (Tagg 2003:259).

In many respects, the power that Tagg refers to could be interpreted as the power of the objectifying gaze, through which subjects are arrested and framed as 'types'. This serves as a fitting point of access into Pelsler's experiments in role-reversal, which are principally concerned with inverting the power relationships bound up in acts of looking. In identifying

possible subjects with whom to trade places, Pelsler initially sought out people who work 'behind the scenes' (like cleaners, builders and shelf-packers), and who are therefore largely invisible to the public beyond the vocational labels that define them. Although her project shifted to incorporate other vocational 'types', it retained its interest in interrogating the coded assumptions and conventions at play in the practices of seeing and being seen.

In Pelsler's photographs, the reductive operations of type-casting are evoked and re-enacted not only in the titles of her works but through various visual devices. One of these is the pose she adopts which, although modelled on the initial poses of her subjects, is consistently frontal. This use of 'rigid frontality' in her poses could be seen to quote a convention in early photography: satirised by Daumier in his *Croquis Parisiens* of 1853, which set the 'pose de l'homme de la nature' against the 'pose de l'homme civilisé', rigid frontality would, in Tagg's words, have 'signified the bluntness and "naturalness" of a culturally unsophisticated class' in contrast to 'the cultivated asymmetries of aristocratic posture' (Tagg 1993:36).

The awkward rigidity of Pelsler's poses also suggests an element of immobility commensurate with the 'type' who is denied the propensity for development or change. Instead of giving us seemingly 'authentic' individuals against which to measure our expectations of 'type', however, Pelsler invokes the shorthand of 'type' only to leave the categories empty, or to fill them with ineffectual stand-ins. In usurping her subjects' roles, Pelsler effectively denies our ability to register the singular individual against the preconceived 'type' and to perform the kind of mental checking for overlaps and deviations that Galton's experiments literalised.

This is partly because Pelsler makes no attempt to mask her acts of duplicity by disguising herself through wigs and make-up. Instead she seems to declare her position as an impostor – a stand-in who is particularly *unconvincing* when the 'type' 'white female' to which Pelsler herself belongs refuses to fit with the roles she assumes. Pelsler's posing as a mechanic, for instance, seems more out of kilter than her posing as a bank hostess even though there is nothing in the former photograph *as such* to signal unequivocally the initial subject's gender.

It is testimony to our own expectations that we immediately regard Pelsler as being more out of place in some of the roles than in others, especially where there is the double mediation of race and gender (as is the case when she role-plays a petrol attendant or refuse collector, these being vocations typically reserved for black South African men). Arguably it is this lack of fit which signals a critical rupture in our acts of viewing, reflecting back on us our own preconceptions as to who should, could or ought to fit the profile of a pre-given category.

Pelser's duplicity also prompts us to recognise the imposture at play in every portrait photograph, and hence to interrogate the idea of the photograph as a marker of authenticity and 'truth'. For Roland Barthes every photograph of the self is already an act of mimicry: caught up in the anguish of knowing that one will be doubled, one can't help posing as an 'other'. Says Barthes, 'once I feel myself observed by the lens ... I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image' (Barthes 1984:10). Thus 'I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this ... I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares)' (Barthes 1984:13).

If this inauthenticity (the stuff of nightmares) unravels every portrait from within, corrupting its position in what Foucault terms the "'general politics" of truth' (quoted in Tagg 1993:172), then it must surely also clear a space for the re-visioning of identity, not according to the misguided dictates of 'truth' or 'type', but as a self-directed construct. According to Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya:

When we pose, we either imagine what people see when they look at us and then try to act out this image, or we want to look like someone else and imitate that appearance. We imitate what we think the observer sees, or what we see in someone else, or what we wish to see in ourselves. This process of reconfiguration and acting out of an ideal is what is so fascinating in the character studies of African studio portraiture (Enwezor & Zaya 1996:33).

In many respects, to acknowledge the potential photography offers for the re-invention of self is to acknowledge that the flipside of the photograph's status as a truthful record has always been its link to magic, fantasy and the realm of the imaginary. Where the bureaucratic discourses participant in the cataloguing of humankind have routinely insisted on the photographic document as *proof*, the space of imposture that photography opens up necessitates a re-reading of the photograph as *pretence*.

According to Geoffrey Batchen early examples of photography, such as Hippolyte Bayard's *Self Portrait as a drowned man* (produced in 1840), demonstrate that the propensity for role-playing, duplicity and artifice afforded by this medium was exploited almost from its inception, in spite of – or perhaps because of – its apparent fidelity to the real. As 'a representation that is also real' (Batchen 1999:173), Bayard's self-portrait – wherein he stages himself as a corpse – is a seemingly truthful record of a fake event. Citing Julia Ballerini, Batchen claims that Bayard's photograph 'speak[s] to the very condition ... of im-posture: the making of a replica, a secondhand construction, a substitute, not the "real thing"' (Batchen 1999:162).

The notion of the photographed self as an impostor, not the 'real thing', seems an appropriate 'lens' through which to access Fosso's self-portraits. Fosso's posing in 'borrowed identities' is not unlike Bayard's role-playing of self as corpse: it suggests a fictive re-visioning, and a double act of imposture where the subject poses for a photograph already posing as an 'other'. To this extent Fosso's utilisation of 'types' – the businessman, the African chief, the pirate, and so forth – is intrinsically caught up in fiction rather than the assumption of an underlying truth. As Enwezor and Zaya suggest, the presumed 'reality' to which Fosso's 'types' refer 'is interestingly absent, as if they were anonymous characters'. In Fosso's work, 'these characters are like reliquaries in the theatre of the imagination' (Enwezor & Zaya 1996:35).

Like Pelsler, then, Fosso strikes a pose, and here too there is a deliberate invocation of 'type' as a form of mimicry and masking. In Fosso's self-portraits the use of different props to signal 'type' solicits a reading which locates Fosso not as an essential subject but as an occupier of countless shifting subject positions, as different in orientation as an African chief is from an American woman. Thus although we may recognise the appearance of Fosso in his photographs we are also compelled to recognise what Craig Owens calls 'a trembling around the edges of that identity' (Owens 1992:183). The project of finding the 'real' Fosso beneath his image is thwarted, as we lose our way amongst an accumulation of guises and types.

As characterisations already fashioned in the reductive images of 'types', moreover, Fosso's self-portraits effectively pre-empt the penetrating ethnographic gaze through which the 'other' is arrested and archived. Fosso's role-playing of the African chief is an apposite example, as both a self-fashioned caricature and an ironic embodiment of Enwezor and Zaya's assertion that when we pose, we 'imagine what people see when they look at us' (Enwezor & Zaya 1996:33).

In as much as Fosso may put himself 'on display', inviting a scrutinising gaze, there is also a withholding of self which is in keeping with his suggestion that 'I don't put myself in the photographs ... I borrow an identity' (interview with Schlinkert 2004:25). Fosso's 'borrowed identities' are thus a form of masking, which is evident at the level of the often quite literal masking of his own gaze. In nearly all of the 1997 self-portraits Fosso's eyes are shielded or partially shielded by sunglasses, spectacles, swimming goggles and a pirate's sash. Even the sailor seems to gaze out above and just to the side of the camera, failing to meet the viewer's eyes.

Interestingly, it is only the two 'feminised' Fossos (the lady of the bourgeoisie and the liberated American woman) – in other words, the two most radically 'othered' Fossos – who look directly back at the camera. But instead of confirming the viewer's position outside of the frame, looking in from a 'safe' space of objective detachment, the quiet assertiveness of these gazes implicates us as viewers in a complex network of gazes and exchanges. We look at Fosso looking at us; Fosso looks at us looking at him looking like her. At the same time, Fosso as subject (director of the image) looks at Fosso as object (character in the image) and vice versa.

Caught up in the dynamics between subject and object, self and 'other', Fosso's self-portraits are also caught up in the struggle between *proof* and *pretence*, where the photograph is both a marker of identity and a maker of identity; something that points, indexically, to its subject at the same time as it re-presents that subject as an 'other'. This duality itself mimics the paradox evident in the role initially played by Fosso's early self-portraits. According to Fosso, his pretext for making them was to send them to his grandmother in Nigeria to reassure her of his health (Bonetti 2004:73). So they functioned both as *proof*, as a 'truthful' record of his well-being, and as a *pretence*, a forum for self-fashioning, role-playing and imposture.

It seems fitting to conclude, in this regard, with Fosso's promise to his customers displayed in the entrance to his first photography studio: 'With Studio Photo Nationale you will be good-looking, elegant, refined and easy to recognise' (Bonetti 2004:67). To be promised an image that is 'good-looking', 'elegant' and 'refined' surely speaks to the photograph's capacity for imposture, its ability to conjure an idealised, fantasy self. To be easily recognised, however, is to be seen as 'the real thing': it presupposes a link between 'actual' self and representation which insists, at least, that the illusion is a convincing one. It is here that photography keeps one foot in the door of the 'politics of truth', even as it allows for truth's undoing.

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