

annebella pollen, university of the arts, UK

Polyphoto of Unknown Woman

Unknown photographer, ca 1950s, Polyfoto, 29.5 x 22.0 cm
National Museum of Film, Photography and Television, Bradford
1992-5005-04

Forty-eight pictures of an unknown woman fill the grid of the contact-sheet. She looks up, down, over her shoulder, to the right, to the left. As with her identity, her gaze eludes. Against a grey background, in a printed cotton sun dress, with fair hair shaped by rollers, tweezed brows and painted lips, our anonymous subject is repeated in a range of positions. In the rounded squares of the little photographs we are given a lattice of forty-eight windows into her world. Front and back, smiling and contemplative, we see her but we do not know her. The set of images that forms the proof sheet for a studio photography session comes with little information attached. "Polyfoto of Unknown Woman, Unknown Photographer, Polyfoto, c.1950s" is all the label declares. Not knowing who is before the camera or who is behind means the technology is the only given and must be where we begin in our pursuit of the meaning of the image.

Polyfoto is the neatly descriptive company name for a system of mid-twentieth century popular portrait photography. Established in 1933, and with branches all over Britain, the Polyfoto process began with a studio session where a series of poses would be recorded with a crank-handled camera, and resulted in a sheet of forty-eight photographs from which enlargements could be made. An illuminating British Pathe newsreel of 1956 (1) depicts the glamorous blonde television and film star Sabrina taking part in a Polyfoto session, and shows the process in action. From a reception area displaying a range of contact sheets and enlarged images the camera moves towards the studio space where, against a plain rear wall, illuminated by three spotlights, a swivel chair stands before the large metal box of the Polyfoto camera equipment. Illustrated images of animals (demonstrating the popularity of the method for the photography of children) are affixed to locations around the studio, out of view of the camera, to locate the gaze of the sitter, as directed by the camera operator. As each of the forty-eight poses is assumed, the photographer turns the handle of the camera and activates the shutter until the handle no longer turns and the sitting is complete.

It was on such a swivel chair, beneath such lights and before such equipment that

our anonymous subject sat. We might assume that, advised by the photographer, she found the marks around the studio on which to focus - explaining her shifting gaze - and with knowledge of the mechanics of the Polyfoto photographic method we can explain the sequential nature of the images by the standardised process the technology dictates. What we cannot know, however, is whether the unknown sitter or the unknown photographer can be held responsible for the elaboration of the performance that develops as the images accrue. The first half the sheet of images depicts head-and-shoulders shots conventional to studio portraiture, while the latter half includes more stylised poses - hand-to-face - and props in the form of plastic flowers (whose material is betrayed by their too rigid leaves and too straight stalks). In poses from wistful to flirtatious, our sitter enacts a set of roles that complicate any attempt at decoding her identity from the images.

If character revelation is traditionally the essence of good portraiture, we might assume that in a set of forty-eight images there is a greater chance of capturing the essence of the sitter than in a single one. Ironically, however, it seems that the set of multiple images shows the mutability of the photograph as a form more clearly than a single image can. Isolated frozen moments in single photographs appear decisive, expressing something fleeting, embodying the 'unconscious optics' of the camera to show what the naked eye may not see. A lone image can be contemplated, made microcosmic and particularly suggestive. This group of images, conversely, destabilises the authority of a single iconic photograph by unleashing forty-eight possible readings of the sitter instead of one. Rather than the image being repeated or reinforced, the proliferation of subtly and not-so-subtly shifting changes of facial expression, angle and pose in the Polyfoto disperses the myth that photography can provide a uniquely telling fragment of a larger whole, suggesting instead the enactment of multiple selves.

Another pressing problem with trying to locate an identity – inner, singular or otherwise - for the sitter in the Polyfoto is there is very little to go on in terms of secondary context. The plain grey background is uniform and common to all Polyfotos. No indication is given of studio location. Historical period may be ascertained through the technical specifications of the photograph, for it is known that Polyfoto only began using colour film shortly before the company's demise in the mid-1960s. (2) Details of hair, make-up and dress confirm this date, as do the plastic flowers and even the poses. Tiny details repay biographical information: a ring is visible on the third finger of the left hand. The lined neck, slight thickening of the chin and rounding of the back suggest that the sitter is a little older than her

coy demeanour first suggests.

While these details offer some disclosure, the poses our sitter favours are so conditioned by the conventions of the studio and the feminine as to be a disguise. As the sitter throws her head back while embracing her rose bouquet, as she closes her eyes to mime the inhalation of their imaginary fragrance, as she raises her face to the spotlight, she does so as part of a social system of codes and behaviours that hide her person behind personae. Graham Clarke has written that “any portrait is a construction, an advertisement of the self”(3), and it is notable that the style of these particular portraits extend the advertisement analogy. Their reference point is the commercial world, evocative as they are of product promotion and the covers of contemporaneous women’s magazines. An awareness of ‘cover-girl’ aesthetics seems to inform the production of the self that the sitter projects. It is worth remembering that, while Polyfoto asserted that it was “the only system of photography giving natural and truly characteristic portraits, since the sitter can move and converse freely”(4), the forty-eight photos are not serendipitously captured images of a person in motion, but a record of the poses the sitter assumed. The photographs, then, do not arrest the sitter, rather she holds herself motionless for the camera to record, and in her imitation of the model, assumes the shape of her desired representation. (5) Roland Barthes has observed that this projection of identity for the camera is more to do with fantasy than it is to do with creating a visible authenticity. He notes, “in front of the camera I am the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one photographer thinks I am”. (6) Even with knowledge of the sitter and the photographer, then, it seems that the personal information such a circumscribed set of studio portraits could convey would be compromised by stylisation and performance.

In this instance, the triangular relationship between sitter, photographer and viewer is complicated by the fact that not only are the sitter and her photographer now anonymous, but the original reception for the images is also unknown, with only their current readers identifiable. If the proliferation of images diminishes the likelihood of locating the sitter, and if the theatricality of poses and props acts as an impenetrable screen, how then to find a way to meaning and value in an anonymous portrait? Perhaps it is only through an autobiographical projection that any sense of recognition can be achieved. In *Camera Lucida*, the newly bereaved Barthes expresses his desire for a “just image” of his late mother. Searching through his photographs, he locates something of her essence in a most unlikely source: a picture of his mother as a five-year-old. This, out of all the available

images of her is the one he recognises. Barthes' sensitive autobiographical approach to uncovering the meaning and value of a photographic portrait may be the approach to analysing the anonymous photograph that has the most integrity.

Photographs set adrift from their original moorings as personal documents without personal information become heady sites for contemplation and projection. The near-recognition that can occur when faced with a mysterious photograph is one that anticipates self-reflection. As Barthes says, "The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading. This is obvious for old ("historical") photographs ... but this is also true of the photographs which at first glance have no link, even a metonymic one, with my existence". (7) Lacking key biographical details, if the photograph cannot inform, it can nevertheless evoke. Geoffrey Batchen has noted, when faced with photographic memorials of unknown and unremembered people, photography's relationship to memory can still be exercised without any direct memories of one's own. As he notes, "the act of remembering someone is surely also about the positioning of oneself, about the affirmation of one's own place in time and space, about establishing oneself within a social and historical set of relationships."(8)

What this unknown sitter can do, then, is to elicit a dense web of associations in the reader - in this case, with my own experiences of Polyfotos: those of my parents. During their engagement in the early 1960s, just before its sitters had the advantage of enjoying Polyfoto's development of colour, my parents, living hundreds of miles apart, each went to their local Polyfoto studio to pose for a set of contact prints, which were then exchanged by post, for the respective fiancés to choose their favoured images. Ten years before my birth, then, my future mother and father sat in the swivel chair and looked where they were told, turned to the right, to the left. For the final two rows of my father's photographs, he removed his glasses in a performance of his own. My mother, in her lifelong costume of black cardigan and pearls, did not produce roses, but was nevertheless made glamorous by the filmic eye of the Polyfoto lens and the direction of the camera operator, in a set of poses I never saw her assume again. The proud lifted chin, the contemplative upward gaze and the head tilted in reverie produced by the imperatives of the studio direction diminish the full grasp of the sitter that the portraits promise. Pictures of my late mother from before I was born tease and deceive, seeming to allow a special proximity, only to act like a mirage the closer I get. Despite Polyfoto's claim to naturalism, the complex compound eye of its gaze in this instance denaturalises by fracturing the utopic hope that photography may capture

what Barthes has called “the impossible science of the unique being”.(9)

The Polyfoto, then, appears to offer multiple views of its subject but, ultimately, its technological contingency and formal limitations render its testimonial as fugitive as all photographic documents. The anonymous Polyfoto, elusive and emptied of original intent, must locate its value as a provocation to memory, even as its own subject is forgotten. The poignant presence and absence suggested by photography as a form is heightened by history and loss of identity. The mute and mutable orphaned image thus becomes a magical mirror for the hopes and fears of the viewer – the only known quantity.

Endnotes

- 1 http://www.britishpathe.com/product_display.php?searchword=polyphoto
- 2 Charles Stokes, “Polyfoto: The new portrait photography”, **Photographica World 64**, March 1993, pp.9-13.
- 3 Graham Clarke **The Photograph** (OUP, 1997) p. 106
- 4 Gen Doy **Picturing the Self: Changing Views of the Subject in Visual Culture** (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005)
- 5 My thinking about the pose is indebted to Kaja Silverman, **The Threshold of the Visible World** (London: Routledge, 1996) and Craig Owens, “Posing”, **Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture** (University of California Press, 1992)
- 6 Roland Barthes **Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography** (London: Vintage, 2003) p.13
- 7 Barthes, p.97-8
- 8 Geoffrey Batchen **Each Wild Idea: Writing Photography History** (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2002) p. 97
- 9 Barthes, p. 71.