

THE  
ART  
OF  
LIVING

MEL THOMPSON



ROUTLEDGE

**Me**

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# Me

Mel Thompson

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Mel Thompson



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# Introduction

I am fascinated by photography: the attempt to capture a fleeting reality, to freeze action, but most of all to record the experience of a moment that is already drifting towards the vortex of the past. Photographs of people are the most challenging and frustrating. In a good photographic portrait there is the sense that the look, the gesture and the setting all reveal a “real” person. “Yes, you’ve captured him exactly”, I say, as I look at the image of someone I know well. Like a painting, a photograph can convey more than the pixels that make it up. I scan the image for clues to the reality of the person who is now reduced to two dimensions, fixed and mute.

A recent exhibition of photographs from Eastern Europe before the Second World War included images of peasants in rough clothes, faces weathered, hands calloused, thoughtful, suspicious of the camera being pointed their way, proud, solid but also wary, vulnerable. Alongside them, other photographic images were clearly contrived, working with abstract shapes or photomontage. All were making a political point, but it was the peasant images that spoke most eloquently of life in that place and time. Whether taking photographs or looking at them, I make the assumption that each person has some unique essence, a character that may be revealed in – but not entirely defined by – the physical circumstances and appearance that the camera records. But what is it that enables an image to show a “real character”? It is difficult to define, yet instantly recognizable.

I go through that same process whenever I encounter someone I know, for the instant of recognition brings with it the remembrance

of a shared history, moments of personal disclosure or deception, acts of kindness or cruelty. A relationship is built on shared experiences that memory provides for me as soon as I approach that person in the present. The face is everything; the moment of recognition changes my whole response to an approaching figure. I immediately know that I am encountering a “person” and they are encountering “me”.

And yet, as I look at a photograph or encounter someone face to face over a coffee, I am always open to being surprised. There may be an aspect of that person that I have not seen before, depths that I have not explored. And equally, there is so much that I carry with “me” that I have yet to share with them. We can never fully know or be known. And that’s the puzzle and frustration. I can recall shared moments, guess what my friend is likely to say on any given topic and feel the emotional warmth of mutual acceptance, but I am also aware that I can choose to hide aspects of myself, and that my friend can do the same. Even un-retouched photographs or film can lie. One year, in my early teens, I wanted a tape recorder for Christmas. I dropped hints and debated with my father the merits of a tape recorder over a record player. He claimed the latter to be far more useful; I belonged to a choir and wanted to record live performances. Christmas came, and the old home movie shows me smiling to camera as I unwrap the record player. My anger and frustration remain completely hidden. My inner experience of that moment is quite unlike the obvious interpretation of the scene depicted on film. I was not what you see. And if then, what of now? And if me, what of you?

To be genuine, rather than to deceive; to be open rather than closed; to be cautious about revealing one’s feelings or to do so recklessly in love: all these experiences assume that there is a knowable person – that the “you” I encounter, and the “me” that you encounter are genuinely knowable entities. But I am forced to recognize the gap between what I am and what others perceive,

and therefore I am forced to acknowledge the gap between what I perceive of others and what they are in themselves.

The more we reflect on the nature of the self, the stranger it becomes. There have been many different approaches to understanding personal identity. The dualist approach emphasizes the difference between the thinking mind, self or soul on the one hand and the physical body on the other. Caricatured by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) as the doctrine of the “ghost in the machine”, it struggles with the problem of how we know other persons and what the self might be like if separated from its physical body. At the other extreme, a materialist approach argues that the self is no more than a convenient label to stick on a portion of physical reality, and that, with the aid of developments in neuroscience, all the wonders of the human mind and spirit will eventually be revealed as patterns of activity within the brain. But can either approach do justice to the self that we experience, and the selves that we encounter around us?

To consider the nature of the self, it is therefore not enough to argue about how mind relates to matter, or whether it would be possible for the same self to inhabit different bodies, or whether we are free or determined, or whether neuroscience can fully explain consciousness. These have been stock issues in the philosophy of mind, and they are perfectly valid questions to ask, but they do not seem to me to engage immediately with the more personal, existential questions: how do I make sense of my life; am I responsible for the person I have become?

In a world where randomness and chance make life transient and unpredictable, religion, psychology and philosophy have all tried, in their different ways, to give meaning and coherence to the human person. The question is not just “Who am I?” but also “What is my life for?” and “What is worth doing?” When I set myself goals or make decisions, I need to believe that I am shaping my future, otherwise I see myself as no more than a puppet, jerking

in response to the strings of circumstance. Whether or not there is a puppeteer, of course, be it God or fate, is another matter. To me, the art of living and the goal of every personal philosophy is to construct a meaningful “me”: to make sense of my life. How that may be done is the question that this book addresses. But let us go back one step and examine the process by which the experiencing self constructs its “me”.

There is a small bunch of lily of the valley on the table in front of me as I write: delicate creamy-white flowers, illuminated by horizontal shafts of early spring sunshine, the light shaping each bell. And as I look at them I am aware that they give me pleasure. But almost immediately I am reminded of myself aged perhaps three or four, walking in the woods near my childhood home, holding my grandmother’s hand, and looking down on the delicate woodland carpet of white and green lily of the valley. So the flowers evoke positive memories of childhood and I start to feel comfortable in myself; I am still here almost sixty years later, the same person that saw them as a child. They are part of what it is to be me.

I notice that the tiny flowers sit in a liqueur glass, and think (at this early hour!) of having a drink, of buying liqueur as a student on a camping holiday, of sipping green chartreuse and thinking then of monasteries, and monks engaged in silent work producing the delicate liquid, gathering the herbs. And I remember again the attractions of the monastic life – silence, and stone steps, and the quiet pace of robed figures beneath a gothic arch, and the fantasy of a disciplined, purposeful life – sensed in my youth as a possible vocation, but later abandoned. And then I think of the many other things that have been lost or set aside as the years have passed, and of my own hectic lifestyle: the choices, good or bad, that have shaped my life, that have defined my path. Impressions, memories and longings come flooding in at the sight of these particular flowers.

Association and memory locate each experience within a personal web of meaning, and when they cannot do so we feel lost

and alienated. New experience is fleeting. Almost as soon as we have it, it is colonized by our memory and we start to incorporate it into a personal map that we are constantly revising, which depicts our terrain of meaning and significance. It is given a place within a very personal set of grid references, relating it to who we are. This is the process that links experience to memory and identity, giving each of us a unique sense of self.

I am a being that watches and moves, that seeks out what it needs, that makes its home, that raises its offspring, that has hopes and fears, aims and goals. But there is a real problem here. As I experience it, the public self that I construct would seem to be the product of the personal decisions that I make. But is that really the case, or is it a delusion, masking an objective, scientifically predictable self?

Psychologists, sociologists, politicians and, particularly, marketing executives know precisely who I am and who I will be as I get older. I am predictable. I am one of a category of people who is likely to prefer product A to product B, and who is likely to be watching television at a particular time and therefore to be exactly on target for that product placement. I am analysed within national statistics. The changes that I experience in myself are explicable: some through biology, as I grow older, others through social pressure. It was absolutely predictable that I should have had long hair and a beard at one time, not through personal choice, but because I was a student in the 1960s, when such things, along with my purple flared trousers, were a social obligation. At the time, I experienced them as my freely chosen rebellion against the style of the previous generation, but with hindsight I was simply obeying the command of a social trend. So am I free to choose and shape myself, or is it all determined and predictable?

If I apply for a job I may be required to produce a curriculum vitae, an account of what I have done with my life thus far, on the assumption that it will show whether I am going to be a suitable

person, appropriately qualified for the post that is available. It should be an honest and objective account of my career. But that's not all the interviewers are going to want to know. They're also after the personal angle. How do I come across? Am I "open" to them? Is the personal chemistry going to be right when I mingle with others on the staff? Am I the person they're looking for? So what do they do? They set psychometric tests, role plays and simulation exercises. They send me off to have coffee, innocently giving me a break from the interview process, only to monitor me once away from the tension and need to perform. "How was he socially?", they'll ask afterwards. And in all this they are desperately looking for "me", as much as I am scanning that photograph for some hint at the real person who stares up at me from the print. So the objective curriculum vitae is not in itself sufficient in assessing whether I am suitable for the job. They want the personal: the intuitive sense of "me". But even if they get that right, am I going to remain the person they now believe me to be?

People seem to want a definite and fixed idea of who I am. Yet all I know, from science and from observing the world around me, is that my life is by no means fixed; it is in a continual state of flux. So here is the dilemma. To shape and direct my life I need a concept of "me" (and so does my potential employer). Without that, I cannot know what to do, what to choose. And yet, I also know that nature and time will rob me of that fixed idea. I am not in control of my life. At every moment things impact on me that can change everything: a disease, an accident, a financial crash, a lapse of concentration while driving, an earthquake. At every moment we are vulnerable and changing. We are never exactly what we thought we would become. Life now is never what we once assumed life in the future would be. The world moves on and changes our lives in the process.

But can I let go of the need for "me"? Is it possible to live in the present moment, sensitive only to the world that is to hand,