

"Cultivate a good life and record it": Self-Improvement Narratives in Selfies, Scrapbooks and Domestic Blogs

Feminist scholars have pointed out that one of the ways in which 19th century women were “tamed” into being good mothers and housekeepers was through womens’ magazines teaching “cleanliness, hygiene, and the whole business of good housekeeping”, as well as “fashion, beauty and rituals around the social calendar and courtship” (McRobbie 2013). Generations of women have taken these recipes and guidelines and tried to follow or resist them in order to become more successful or happier. Celebrities have a similar pedagogical function (Marshall 2010), as do micro-celebrities in social media (Marwick 2013): we look to them and copy them.

In social media the mechanics and the rhetorics of these strategies shift but are still visible. This paper uses two online courses to examine ways in which the domestic blogosphere shapes ways in which mothers strive to care for themselves, whether with or against the mainstream. I take a humanities approach, using literary, visual and rhetorical analysis of the course material and of texts and images shared in blogs and social media, as well as drawing on critical theory and historical context to make my argument.

Traditional photo albums primarily show happy family members “together at leisure” (Rose 2014, 68), but this format is being redefined by the streams of everyday images we see in social media and with digital cameras. Some of the new kinds of images we see are clearly inspired by magazines, such as daily outfit selfies (fashion magazines) and photos of the home (home decorating magazines), but we also see a deliberate self-reflexivity in the choice of images that is more akin to the self-reflection previously seen in diaries. The two online courses I discuss directly encourage this kind of visual self-reflection. The first is an online self-portraiture class titled NOW YOU, led by Kristin Zecchinelli and Meredith Winn. The second is Becky Higgins’ online scrapbooking course Project Real Life. Each course costs USD 99 and offers participants a series of emails with set photography assignments and inspirational texts and videos over several

weeks, as well as access to a closed community where participants share and discuss photos and thoughts.

An introductory email to the NOW YOU course makes it clear that taking self-portraits is a means of self-cultivation with the goal of becoming more at ease with oneself: “our ultimate hope is that you gather tools along the way that will have you loving that YOU right NOW, but will also keep you on this journey of self portraiture long after class ends.” Project Real Life, on the other hand, is part of a larger commercial business and ties in with Higgin’s Project Life® scrapbooking materials. Higgins’s slogan is “Cultivate a good life and record it”. Recording one’s life is seen as part of the work required to cultivate a good life, much as Foucault noted that the ancient Greeks saw the principles of “Take care of yourself” as equally important as “Know thyself”, although the former has been less valued by more recent Christian asceticism (Foucault 1988). The introductory text to the online class “Project Real Life” explains that “Becky’s main goal is to inspire you to see the everyday beauty in your world and celebrate ordinary moments, but she’ll also show you how to preserve the real-life pictures you take using her signature Project Life system.” An explicit goal of self-nurturing in Project Real Life is “...being your best self for your family” (week one). Assignments focus on taking photos of everyday situations, often involving housework. For example, in week four the theme is organisation and participants are asked to create their seven photo weekly spread by photographing a messy drawer, a well-organised shelf, technology they use for organisation, the inside of any closet, media storage and some part of their laundry process. Participants also fill in journaling cards about each photo, and slot everything into the Project Life® plastic folders with a special weekly quote card for the final slot: “Organize to simplify”.

NOW YOU is a less commercial venture, and the facilitators’ emails sell nothing beyond their courses. Zecchinelli and Winn share their own self-portraits with very personal stories, and it is clear that selfies are an important part of their self-care. In week 2, participants are asked to photograph their own feet. One of the facilitators writes in the accompanying email, “it all started before i could face

my own camera. i wanted to prove that i was here (there, anywhere) living breathing mothering and discovering life. and since i couldn't face my own lens, i looked to the ground." From this perspective, turning the camera on oneself is a way of claiming one's very right to exist. The traditional family album may be controlled by mothers, but the mother herself is often absent from the photographs. The goal is the course's final assignment: to dare to take a self-portrait looking straight into one's own eyes.

For many women these courses' clear breaks with the conventions of only presenting the perfect life rather than self-portraits or images of housework is no doubt important. Society's conventional prioritising of mind over "the drudgery of daily, bodily tasks" can be seen as a denigration of womens' lived experience (Bunkers and Huff 1996). And yet Sontag warns that "aestheticizing war leads to anesthetizing war". Does the aestheticization of laundry through courses like Project Real Life lead us to anesthetize laundry, to borrow Sontag's words?

The full version of this paper, which will be presented at the conference, analyses the two courses, and blogs and images from the domestic blogosphere, in further detail, showing how they represent both an attempt to find satisfaction in a conventional model of motherhood and a form of resistance to these norms. For some, the very act of taking a photograph of oneself or of one's laundry is itself a small act of resistance, as an email from the NOW YOU workshop reminds us: "shooting self portraits requires a quiet space. as a mom, i have 2 little kids underfoot many hours of the day. whenever i can, if a quiet moment alone presents itself, i go to my bedroom, find that window light that i love, and turn the camera on me."

References

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