

“Photograph others as if you were taking your own picture.”

On David Perlov, the Photographer who Took his own Picture

By: Shuka Glotman

In his last movie, *My Stills 1952/2002*,¹ which is a cinematic essay on stills photography, against the background of photographs in which he himself appears, David Perlov makes the following remark:

“Photography—photograph others as if you were taking your own picture, [or taking a picture of] all of nature.” This assertion addresses at one and the same time both the spectator and Perlov himself, who was well aware of the invasive power of the photographic medium, and it hints at the requisite measure of caution and humility required of the photographer when he aims his camera at others. When he trains the camera upon himself, he himself experiences the trials and tribulations of exposure through photography.

The Photographer and the Mirror

Perlov took his first stills photographs in 1952, when he was staying in Paris. He had determined to put aside painting and focus on cinema. During the transition from one field to the other, he shot two rolls of film in black and white, a sort of self-imposed test of his visual abilities. He would return to stills photography only in 1961, after which he actively engaged in it until his death. In those early rolls of film from Paris, he dealt with his immediate domestic surroundings in the hotel room and in the street—a sort of rapid outline of the themes and motifs that would preoccupy him during a lifetime of creative endeavor encompassing photography, illustration and cinema.

Perlov also trains his camera on the large mirror in the room. In two of these photographs, the room is alluded to by means of the vacant wall, which is covered with floral wallpaper, and the shelf positioned beneath the mirror, upon it a leather traveling bag, a small alarm-clock

and some bright cloth handkerchiefs. Reflected in the mirror are the vacant wall opposite and the upper edge of the wallpaper, which doesn't quite reach the ceiling. From the ceiling hangs a bare electric bulb, the light from which scorches the mirror's surface. The top of the photographer's head juts past the bottom of the mirror. In the other photograph, the frame's lower edge trims the photographer's head just beneath the eyebrows—his eyes cannot be seen, and the camera too is missing. This is an image anchored in the tension between the empty room and the signs of life hinted at inside it, like a theater stage just revealed when the curtain rises, moments before the show begins.

In the first episode of his film *Diary*,² Perlov addresses his daughter Yael, whose reflection can be seen in the bathroom mirror, saying: "Good morning, Yael. Both of us are in the mirror, only from different angles." The figure of the photographer is absent from the mirror. Only in the following episodes will Perlov train his movie camera directly on the mirror and discover in it the reflected members of the household, while he himself stands holding the movie camera which hides his face. Through this gesture he is trying as it were to do away with the division between photographed and photographer, in an attempt to renounce the mystery of the procedure whereby a photograph is produced. He creates the possibility of exposing both the process and the result at the same moment. In the context of *Diary*, this involves the concrete investigation of the space of intimacy, which also examines the nature of the photographic medium and of those who use it. Years later, Perlov would exploit the mirrors of the cafés of Paris in the same way to photograph his own reflection in them as he captured the passers-by in the street with his camera. The "magic" of the frozen image of the moment is exposed by the presence of the photographer. By its presence, the camera in his hands signifies the connection between action and result, between accidental and deliberate, between inside and outside. This time the examination of

the relationship between photographer and photographed hints at distance and solitude.

With the move to his new residence, mentioned later in that first episode of *Diary*, Perlov contends with the new possibilities of gaze opened to his camera lens. These include not only the elevated viewpoint over the city offered by the 14th floor apartment, but also the “wonders” of the lobby in the entrance to the building, with its mirrors and dark panes of glass. Especially entrancing is the elevator and the mirrors inside it. For Perlov all of these became his daily photographic field of activity.

The Photographer inside the Elevator

The daily ride in the elevator, facing the mirrors inside it, was for Perlov a sort of forced journey in which he was trapped in time. He would photograph himself inside the elevator when he found himself alone in it, usually hiding his face behind the camera. The “chamber of mirrors” turned into the cell of the confessional, in which he had to be with himself and with his feelings, dangling between heaven and earth. The limited room, which is demarcated by the mirrors, creates an illusory sense of space. The figure of the photographer hovering inside it between the mirrors generates a large number of simultaneous reflections, emphasizing the difficulty of distinguishing between a figure and its reflection, between reality and its representation. The presence of the camera in these images is a key to the resonance established between the elevator compartment and the person imprisoned in time within it, and the “dark cell,” the camera obscura or camera, which captures in time the traces of light reflected from it.

Riding in the elevator carries the potential of change and transition from one state of consciousness to another. In the proposal for *My Stills 1952/2002*, Perlov writes: “Another surprising moment is when

people enter the elevator. Here too [there is] a sort of new opportunity, another door opening before them, another possibility in life.”

By means of the elevator photographs Perlov examines the paradoxical state of affairs structured into photography, in which the photographer cannot be behind the camera and in front of it at the same time. The reflection of his figure in the elevator mirrors, as photographer and photographed at a fleeting moment in time, is defined by the elevator door which opens and shuts automatically. This situation again hones a familiar awareness, and the camera signifies the existential task he has taken upon himself: the task of the observer who is trapped in the paradox of photography, who is unable to participate in life itself and record it at the same time. This awareness arises already in the initial sequences of *Diary*: when Perlov’s daughter Yael invites him to join her and taste the steaming soup in the bowl on the table, he remarks simply and clearly: “I know that from this day I’ll be faced with a decision: to eat the soup, or to photograph it.”

When he began shooting in color in 2000, Perlov exploited the artificial light sources with their different coloration inside the elevator and stairwells, as if he were in a mobile studio offering theatrical lighting. In this context, he also discovered the creative potential of lighting by flash as he took pictures of himself in the mirror.

The Photographed Photographer behind the Lighting by Flash

Throughout *Diary*, Perlov describes moments in which he didn’t feel comfortable aiming the movie camera at people in the street and making eye-contact with them. This usually hinted at his own unease with himself at those times. This emerges from Talia Halkin’s description of her first meeting with Perlov in his home, the moment at which he aimed his camera at her and photographed her, muttering a sort of apology: “This is my mask.”³ The camera can serve as a means

of defense in the hands of a photographer observing his surroundings, but at the same time its use arouses a self-consciousness. In most of the photographs in which Perlov took pictures of himself, his face is hidden by the camera.

In Perlov's hands, this "camera mask" was given an original twist in the form of lighting by flash. He usually used the camera's built-in flash, so that the camera itself became the dominant light source in the image. What generally appears to be the common amateurish mistake of light flashes facing a mirror, light reflected directly into the camera lens which scorches and obliterates the figure opposite the mirror—turns with Perlov into a desirable possibility of expression. By the calculated and measured use of the flash, the concealment of the photographer's face behind the camera took on a non-material significance, which intensifies the transience of the gaze. In many cases the camera too has been "wiped out" and has turned into a blaze of light; the tool has turned into a "state of matter" which melts and fuses the photographer holding it into itself, forming a single spiritual unity.

It is possible in these photographs to discern the echo of a series of black and white photographs taken by Perlov in the early 1970s.⁴ In the series, portraits of friends appear in the dimness of a Tel Aviv bar, illuminated momentarily by the light of a match, in the flash of its bursting into flame. The photographic "revelation" is brief and passes in the wink of an eye. Similarly, the distinctive image produced in lighting by flash also is too swift to be experienced by us in reality. It can be captured and exists only in the photographic medium.

The Photographer who Photographs Himself beside the Camera

Near the end of the first episode of *Diary*, in the course of a summer vacation in Eilat, Perlov says, "I will try to make a self-portrait," like someone putting himself to the test. At first he photographs his own

reflection in the door of the hotel room as he's sitting on the balcony, the movie camera in front of his face. Afterwards he photographs himself inside the room, opposite the mirror, his face still hidden. Finally he moves the movie camera aside for a moment: his face is revealed for a brief instant, and his gaze appears to be one of wonder, perhaps even amazement

It is not with every gaze in the mirror that someone sees himself. Paul Auster says: "If a man is to be truly present among his surroundings, he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees, He must forget himself in order to be there. And from that forgetfulness arises the power of memory. It is a way of living one's life so that nothing is ever lost."⁵

During Perlov's last years, more and more photographs appeared in which his face is openly visible opposite the mirror into which he was shooting. The curiosity and surprise in his face at the sight of his reflected figure didn't diminish even over the passage of thirty odd years. Perlov consistently avoided using the camera's built-in self-portrait mechanism. The desire to track the camera's viewpoint close at hand was translated into the repeated presence of the camera in the frame. The presence of the camera in the image took on the meaning of a contemporary *memento mori*, a sort of acknowledgment of the transience of the observer and of the eternity of the human gaze. For the first time the possibility was created of linking photographic exposure with self-exposure. An acknowledgment similar to Perlov's arises from Dan Pagis' short poem "Exposure".⁶

The mask of skin,
Beneath it the mask of flesh,
Beneath it the bones of the skull,
The black space between the celestial bodies.

¹ *My Stills 1952/2002*, 2003 (60 min., video), produced by Belfilms and the Israeli Film Service.

² *Diary*, 1988 (6 episodes, 55 min. each, b&w and color, 16 mm.), produced and screened by Britain's Channel 4.

³ Talia Halkin, "The Diary of David Perlov", *The Jerusalem Post*, 24.10.2003.

⁴ For more on this series of photographs, see Liran Atzmor's movie *Perlov's Room*, 1999, and Perlov's own *My Stills 1952/2002*.

⁵ Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 138.

⁶ Dan Pagis, "Exposure," in *Complete Poems* (eds. T. Karmi & Hannan Hever; Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute and Kibbutz Hameuchad Press, 1991), p. 231.