REFLEXIVE COMMENTARY

‘TEETH’ began as the result of a conversation about the significance of teeth in our everyday lives; the ways in which teeth affect people’s perceptions of each other and themselves. I chose to focus on this issue due to its universality - everyone thinks about their teeth daily, whether this is to take part in rituals such as brushing or dentistry, or simply a cosmetic concern. My initial intention when making the film, ‘TEETH’, was to open others to this conversation, which is often considered internally rarely discussed in larger groups. I chose to explore this subject through interviews with friends, beginning with international students living in Amsterdam, who therefore had both internalised and external opinions on the subject. I thought it was interesting to investigate where these opinions overlapped, and particularly where they didn’t. Following the limitations of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was limited in my ability to film, and chose to alter the discussion of ‘TEETH’. I opted to focus on one friend’s story to begin with, then break the film into sections as initially intended. I also took a larger focus on elements such as the social implications of having particularly ‘good’ or ‘bad’ teeth. This added both humour and sadness into my film, which I enhanced through the use of videos and clips found online regarding the subject. This film was not everything I hoped it to be, due to the limitations of the pandemic and my own skill, but I believe it was effective in opening the discussion to a wider audience, which was my overall intention.

I begin my film with a quote from Horace Miner, which states that the ‘Nacirema’ have “an almost pathological horror and fascination with the mouth” (Miner, 1956) Miner’s work is a parody on the anthropological observations being made at his time of writing, which focuses on the American subject (Nacirema spelled backwards). This quote shows that, at least in the 1950s, teeth were a large concern for Americans. The first television advertisement in the UK, also from the 1950s, was for a ‘dentist-recommended’ toothpaste. Half a century later, teeth remain a prevalent part of Western body ritual, with recommendations that people brush twice a day and visit the dentist twice a year. Miner notes that these visits are painful and often unrewarding, yet they are

repeated “year after year, despite the fact their teeth continue to decay.” (Miner, 1956). This shows the level of ritual involved in tooth care, which has not yet been discussed often in a social capacity. This is a focus I had intended to expand on, through expanding my interviews on this topic. I had previously had discussions about the significance of hair and clothing on one's identity, things which can be changed as often as every day. But teeth are much harder to alter - and possibly just as significant.

I became aware of discussions surrounding teeth following some research online. I learned that there is a sub discipline of biological anthropology called dental anthropology, which analyses teeth to make inferences about the diet, practices and ancestry of the tooth’s owner. However, this is seemingly unrelated to my focus, which is based on the subject’s personal feelings about their teeth and others’. I began to notice that the social role of teeth is cross-cultural, with different levels of significance in different societies. I focus on this in my film, particularly when discussing business settings. The initial conversation which led to the film was based on a friend’s decision to undergo the expensive process of *Invisalign* in order to make herself more attractive to potential employers. This was something I believed to be a primarily American concern, which led me to the discussion of teeth as an indication of poverty. ‘Bad teeth’ are common among the homeless, while relatively unseen among the wealthy. Most portrayals on film and television of people from poorer backgrounds do not take teeth into consideration. These are an indication of the limitations of a healthcare system which is dependent on jobs and expendable income, such as the one in place in America. If I were to continue this project, it would have a large focus on class differences made evident through teeth.

Through discussions with friends and family, I began to discover more insights about teeth - for example, the fact that many of my friends had insecurities about their teeth, which they never spoke about. I soon realised that the societal role of teeth is much greater than I thought. I found that most interviewees were hesitant to say that they judged others based on their teeth, but quick to say they worried about their own. I asked a number of people (who I was ultimately unable to interview on camera) the same four questions, which I have linked on my website. These showed that people were also quicker to mention insecurities about themselves than positive feelings towards their teeth. Some cited indifference, mentioning that perfection is an unobtainable standard. This stood out to me as a strong response due to the lengths which people will go to in order to perfect the appearance of their teeth, as explored within my film. Today in Western society, teeth can be the difference between getting a job and being rejected, as well as a prominent sign of attraction. In an effort to look more presentable, people have their gaps closed with braces, undergo teeth whitening processes and have their natural teeth filed down and replaced with permanent porcelain veneers. This shows the role of teeth in people’s opinions of themselves and others on a daily basis.

Overall, I found that this was an interesting discussion which I was able to open to a wider audience through my film. This is one of the most essential parts about visual anthropology as a medium, as it is accessible to all. Within social anthropology, teeth have not been a large focus, but I believe that this will change as the discussion gains popularity and is brought to the forefront of conversation. There are a large amount of societal implications which are overlooked when teeth are not a part of anthropological discussion.

Miner, H., 1956. *Body Ritual Among The Nacirema.* Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, College Division