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The Mirror and Other Reflective Surfaces

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Reflecting introduction

“Here is the Mirror of Galadriel.
I have brought you here so that you may look in it, if you will”.¹

Mirrors are legendary and are known for bringing trouble upon those who approach them. Seven years of bad luck to those who break them, annihilation to those who gaze at them. But they are tools that permit us to contrast our exterior and interior images allowing us to construct an accurate appearance. In a society where attractive people are widely favored, mirrors, while having the capacity to project on their surface what stands in front of them, are also gadgets without instruction manuals. “Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who is the fairest of them all?”

The interpretation of a mirror’s reflection is as subjective as any other form of art. Beauty is in the eyes of those who see it and, in a world surrounded by images of beautiful people, constantly flashing in every corner on billboard surfaces, the mirror reveals one’s appearance and can make harder the preservation of self-esteem when one, already brain-washed by the stereotypical beauty standards, is confronted with one’s reflection. If the mirror allows a vision of our body as a whole it also contributes to body-image distortion.

The level of self-consciousness cannot be reached through the reflection because it is a judgment based on a two-dimensional image and while one looks toward the mirror, one cannot look inwards. The mirror is an obstacle to the development of critical thought, it fascinates with its mystery the ones who approaches it, but captures their attention and prevents introspection. It makes individuals focus on themselves, but also makes them slaves of a simple reflection, and by trapping their gaze, it isolates them and keeps them far from participating in life among others. If mirrors can enclose magic and reveal the future, if they can open passages to other worlds, the precision of their deciphering is dependent on one’s maturity and ability to interpret the reflected image because mirrors «shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be».²

The Other Side of the Mirror

My mother placed a mirror in her flat, at the end of the long and dark corridor connecting my brothers’ room with my own. For some strange reason I never comfortably turned my back to the mirror. I would close my eyes and walk straight ahead. Do not take me wrong, I am not superstitious, but the idea of having the reflection of my back behind me always gave me the chills. I prefer to have the reproductions of my image in front of my bare eyes. What if my double turns around while I am not looking? My first readings brought me news of others who, as me, shared this sort of respect for mirrors. I was not Lewis Carroll’s Alice

wondering through the looking glass and ready to enter the strange world on the other side. My first good companion was Jorge Luis Borges, who feared mirrors because of their capacity to multiply the world. As long as there is a mirror in the bedroom, he said, I am not alone, there is always the other. It was not a fear of seeing ghosts, after all spirits and vampires have no reflex in the mirror. The mirror seems to be the proof of their lack of belonging to the world of the living. And if, suddenly, I turned towards the mirror and my face was not there? That is possibly why I have always refused to enter halls of mirrors which are capable of distorting the subject's being reflected, image and mirror mazes that disorientate the individual walking through it and which seem to be very popular activities in amusement parks. Superstition also exists concerning death and mirrors that must be removed or covered so that the soul of the dead person is not trapped inside the mirror. One thing was true, my friends said, seven years of bad luck fall upon those who break a mirror. (Well, that seems to be more comforting doesn't it?) In 19th century Tennyson's poem *Lady of Shalott*, the cracking of the mirror 'from side to side' releases a curse on the protagonist. Sometimes bad results come just with a simple glance on the subject's own appearance. In mythology we are reminded by the story of Narcissus and Medusa that looks can kill, either the reflection is on a water mirror or a warrior's shield, while in gothic literature, even Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* is horrified by its own reflection.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

In a society that favors appearance, mirrors have been loyal servants. For some reason beauty and goodness of character have been identified as completing one another. Good looks and moral virtue are not synonymous but somehow the bad witch in fairytales could never be naturally beautiful. Her beauty had to be a product of her malefic powers; only a trick, nothing but an illusion.

Standards of beauty are as variable as the changing speed and the pressures of keeping up with fashion. When beauty seems to be everywhere around us, literary in every street corner, stamped in billboards and magazine covers', when the methods of achieving it are a business opportunity from cosmetics and dieting to surgery, there is always something wrong and always place for improvement according to the rules. One is never too thin and one's nose is never too small. It is a huge battle to achieve the beauty standards but even for the small percentage of people who are attractive by nature, the pressure to maintain their appearance is enormous: there is always someone more gorgeous in the room.

Being naturally attractive is a question of luck on the DNA lotto, having the right appearance at the right historical moment, and the persistence of such quality is as fragile as any other living thing when exposed to weather conditions. Only a small fraction (5%) of the female population achieve media's stereotype ideal for women in terms of weight and size. The percentage is reduced when the ideal includes other factors such as body shape, hair, skin and face structure.

Only the human being, the chimps, the gorillas and the orangutans can recognize their own reflection in the mirror. The human being can recognize his own image in a mirror at about two years old. But not every human being sees the same thing. In front of a mirror a heterosexual woman seems to be more self-critical compared to a heterosexual man. In this case, men's dissatisfaction with their own image is more common during early-adolescence and middle-age and concerns the balance between height and muscle mass. Young females, on the other hand, are constantly exposed from an early age to extremely high standards of stereotypes of the female image. The impact is the widely spread idea among young girls concerning being overweight and ugly, a phenomenon called 'body-

image distortion'.³ Girls, as young as seven, go on a diet because they think they are too fat. With puberty and the body changes that naturally occur, there is also an increase in the gap between physical and cultural impositions. It seems that individuals who reject to do not internalize sociocultural standards are more likely to have a positive body-image.

Reading Magic Mirrors

But how much can one see when one looks into a mirror? In Jorge Luis Borges short story *The Aleph* it is revealed the existence of a point in space able of containing images of all other parts where it is possible to gaze into and see simultaneous everything from every angle "without superposition or transparency". While modern common mirrors are made with a thin layer of aluminium behind a glass sheet, old mirrors often consisted on a sheet of polished metal made of silver or copper. Understood as a gateway into the spirit world, old magic mirrors had shapes and marks that were to the interpreter inspiring reading signs⁴ and the mirror reflexes' were a mesmerizing invitation to look over the future. Magic mirrors were since Antiquity used in the uncovering of the occult and its readers became known as specularii. Among the rules for magic mirrors, the person scrying⁵ should be positioned in a way to avoid having its own image reflected in the mirror.

Have you ever heard a story about a mirror that brought up positive results? We are told, in the apocryphal Book of Enoch, that, before the Biblical flood, the art of making mirrors was taught to men by Azazel, one of the falling angels. The result was the spread of vanity among men. Traditional literature includes many examples of such magic mirrors: in 14th century Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in 16th century Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, in 19th century Cao Zhan's *Dream of the Red Chamber* or brothers Grimm's *Snow White* but also in 20th century J. R. R. Tolkien's mirror of Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*. More recently in 1997 J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* presents the Mirror of Erised, a magic mirror containing a description of its own powers "I show not your face but your heart's desire".

Art Reflecting in Mirrors

The mirror has been associated with the creation of art through its ability to reproduce reality. To Leonardo da Vinci the painter's mind should be like a mirror, "which transforms itself into the color of the thing it has as its object, and is filled with as many likenesses as there are things placed before it".⁶

The mirror has been also used in fine arts because of its ability to distort forms⁷ and to enlarge the perception of space and destroying borders, but equally through its capacity to change the relation between the individual, time and space; the power of including the viewer into the picture's narrative. Examples of such works are Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), Velasquez' *Las Meninas* (1656) and Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1881-82). The mirror was at the beginning of the fifteenth century a symbol of vanity associated with pride and lust but, in *Arnolfini Portrait*, the mirror itself and the position it occupies within the portrait, have a more virtuous meaning. Placed above the couple's hands in their betrothal and decorated with passion scenes in its frame, the mirror symbolizes virginity and purity; it formalizes the union of two persons. In *Las Meninas* the mirror is the painting's compositional centre; it reproduces both private and public dimensions of absolute monarchy. In *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* the mirror reflects appearance, while the painting itself focuses on social relations, Manet presents two dimensions: the superficiality of entertainment and the misery of intimate life with emphasis on women's role.

Consciousness Reflected in Mirrors

Mirrors allow the perception of the parts of the body⁸ not directly visible to the individual, since one cannot see one's head or eyes with one's own eyes. The alienation of one's own image can take to situations when one does not recognize as its own, the image being reflected in the mirror. The absence of knowledge about the mechanisms of the mirror can also take to explanations concerning its functioning: therefore the existence of other "I" in the mirror can be attributed to a demon. In developmental psychology, the ability to recognize the mirror image is considered a test of self-awareness. Recognizing one's own image in the mirror is considered a self-referential mechanism among other forms of self-recognition such as autonomy (recognizing one's own name), introspection (recognizing one's own internal structure) and reflection (recognizing one's place in the world).⁹

To Jung mirrors are instruments for self-disclosure from the persona used within society. It is in front of the mirror that one becomes disclosed and discovers his own face. The reflection is the moment of confrontation between the real and the constructed mimesis of the ideal because: "The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face".¹⁰ To Jung, the mirror is also the passage to reflection, an instrument through which the individual recognizes his/her own place in the world: "If we do not fashion for ourselves a picture of the world, we do not see ourselves either, who are the faithful reflections of that world. Only when mirrored in our picture of the world can we see ourselves in the round."¹¹

Mirrors Reflecting Society

The idea of the mirror is present in Feuerbach's anthropological interpretation of the idea of the divine. According to the author god's qualities are a reflection of the characteristics contained in the relations among the members of a society. Therefore, divine qualities are a mirror image reflecting human qualities. The consistence of the idea of such a god has alienated individuals from their nature, because man compares himself with a fantastic reflection, a product of timeless progressive abstraction, and by pursuing values based on a mental image he distances the reality of its own existence.

The mirror has been used as a symbol representing different ideological and social media functions. To Baudrillard it will be exactly the capacity of the mirror to reflect the reverse side of one reality that will not allow the transcendence of the mind to other political economy structure. According to the author, mirrors are media used to reflect the real, they create simulations. Human understanding of reality is based on these simulations; it is a copy, a mirror perception taken for reality itself. This idea is related with Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses which are mechanisms of discipline such as media and arts. According to the author, when exposed to these, subjects identify with the message being transmitted and develop misrecognition, a misconceived perception of reality. But the idea of uninterrupted emission and apprehension of a message is not possible in a model of communication that includes the unavoidable presence of noise concerning the physical environment itself or the individual's physiological and psychological states. To De Certeau, for example, the public is not shaped by the products imposed on it, but each audience uses media differently according to the meanings they wish to extract from the cultural values offered to them by the dominant elite dominating information flows.

The Mirror Stage

Lacan called mirror stage to the phase in a child's life in which the infant identifies with the image of an "I" which is exterior to its body and is reflected by a mirror or projected by the mother. The perception of the body in the mirror is complete in contrast with the fragmented image of the body provided by the senses. To Lacan it is this complete image in the mirror that allows the child's coherent perspective of the world and its own body present within it. During the mirror stage the child understands space in the sense of inter-personal relations based on "I" and "You". But the child's identification with this image will be always in terms of projection concerning the "other". Because the ideal "I", when compared with the real "I", is unmatchable, the child is condemned to fail in any attempt for unifying both egos. The result is called by Lacan "organic insufficiency", a profound sense of frustration which can provoke tension among human relations. The frustration caused by the incapacity to meet the ideal "I" can be sometimes expressed through the subject's directing of aggression towards the object reflecting the ideal.

Zizek reading of Lacan proposes that the existent immanent aggression, the incapacity to meet the ideal, can cause in some individuals the tendency for misconceptions of the message towards a frame of personal sense of logic. Barthes refers to the practice of using multiple mirrors with the objective of increasing libertines' sensual enjoyment. Just as the same message can be read differently, the media too can be used in various ways.

Other Reflective Surfaces

Baudrillard states in his book *America* that the mirror has been exceeded by the video in its capacity to simulate reality. Previously, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey had introduced the mirror stage principle in male audience cinematic experience. According to the author the mirror assumes the form of the screen and the ideal "I" is performed by the male protagonist of the movie. The identification with the hero is the requirement for the understanding of the film's narrative by the spectator.

In our days another projection can be through the computer's screen. Among different group photo projects on line there is one called "The Mirror Project" launched in 2001, which consists on capturing pictures of oneself in all manner of reflective surfaces. The idea for "The Mirror Project" started in 1999 in a website entitled "Jezebel's Mirror" created by Heather Champ, a web designer from San Francisco, who after her parents' death started photographing herself in mirrors. It was the thought that she couldn't be the only one doing this that compelled her to launch an open invitation on line and the result is a web site with more than seven thousand self-portraits from all over the world. According to Champ, these self-portraits are a way to see people being themselves, a way to see people the way they see themselves or as Otto Dix, a German Expressionist would say, self-portraits are 'confessions of an inner state' by unmasking the subject being portrayed.

Mirroring a Twisted Image

Mirrors' effect on self-consciousness could be illustrated by the fact that mirrors are not an object present in places dedicated to praying because by reflecting the image of man they distract the prayer's attention from concentrating on the divine person.¹² Another example is the fact that, in Jewish tradition during morning periods, mirrors are covered in the house of the dead person because the priority of the family that lost one of its members should not be the improvement of self-appearance.

Technology has allowed the high scale production of mirrors, present in large numbers in several places during our daily life: at home, in bathrooms, elevators, waiting rooms, shops. The opportunities to gaze our own reflection largely increase when to mirrors

we add other reflexive surface such as metallic or glossy surfaces. What is the impact of living surrounded by glimpses of ourselves? Mirrors and reflexive surfaces allow a real time contact with our reflection. Modern media allow storage and post-autonomous replaying. Photographs, audio and video recorders keep a fraction of our life to be exposed on demand. Can one be oneself when exposed to such surfaces or media? In this sense how can a mirror contribute to self-knowledge? A mirror allows the recognition of our exterior image but by openly exposing the person to its own appearance it blocks one's capacity to live free of frequent self-awareness concerning one's own image. One needs silence for introspection.

With the continuous contact with one's own face, the self-image becomes just another projected image. The enormous quantity of projected images, in its large majority pictures of people of rare beauty, and the confrontation with one's own face in the mirror brings up the unavoidable comparison. The effect of exterior images on one's own self-esteem wouldn't be possible if one's own image was not available to oneself. The presence of those two, both the ideal "I" on advertisements and the reflection of the real "I" on the mirror surface, take to the comparison of both, side by side in perspective. The effects and impact of this comparison depends, obviously, on one's own self-esteem, to which the age factor is directly connected. May be there is a reason why children cannot recognize their own image reflection. The image that one can see reflected in the mirror, the so-called complete "I" according to Lacan, cannot be perceived in its totality through the senses but can be apprehended only with the aid of instruments such as reflective surfaces. However, the positive contact with the mirror, including the discovery of one's own appearance as well as the sense of belonging to a wider reality involving others, is an experience that can become negative. My position is that the constant exposition to one's own image in mirrors and the constant exposition to idealized images of human body and face projected by different media can be obstacles to self-consciousness.

In a world populated by perfect images of people, where one fights daily to resemble them, the simple human being reacts more often like Frankenstein's monster than as Narcissus facing his reflection on the water's surface. Among the gods reflected on billboards our own face in the mirror is a revelation of imperfection. It is not a question of comparing oneself with others; it is a matter of constant pressure by over exposure to unreal characters. The over exposure to such images distracts the focusing of human attention in other dimensions rather than two dimensional visual beauty, without questioning methods or balance.

Unreal icons are instruments of pressure on cultural values; they represent an idea that fits only in their ideal bodies. Those silent gods have nothing to say, their own message is standing perfectly and exhibiting an image of happiness which is two dimensional; there are no deep thoughts, no sight of mental activity. Why do they smile? Because they use a certain toothpaste or chew a certain gum or just got another credit card. How can one understand what can make us smile when all the time the silent gods on billboards promise happiness in exchange for buying some products?

The constant exposition to our own image reflection converts our image mirror into just another image among images. It is not the ideal but hyper-real on which we work on with the objective of approaching the ideal "I", the images projected through advertisement. The underdevelopment of self-knowledge and introspection capacity, converts human beings into simple canvases or raw stones ready to be worked on according to fashion and cosmetic surgery. Our body is converted into mirror writing which only makes sense when reflected. It is not a question anymore of pleasing potential erotic partners, it is simply following directions. There is no time for mental reflection. The tendency to portray in advertisement idealized images of human body and face with slightly no differences is

obvious: the same lips size, the same tummy muscles' shape. By being exposed to that idealized images one's own imperfections are accentuated and while one's confidence decreases the possibilities of feeling tempted to become continuous consumer of products that supposedly decrease the gap between the ideal and the real increase. And my point is that children, specially, should be protected from extreme exposure to advertisement and their own mirror image because comparison should be delayed until a minimum maturing of both reason and feelings.

Mirroring a Conclusion

We see too many images but we touch less and less surfaces, we feel no textures, we see volume and size but feel no warmth, no softness. Because they cannot see, blind people focus on other senses and develop a different sense of themselves and their relation to space. May be if one walked blindfolded one could relax after a while. In the dark, all possibilities seem equal; we just follow the sense of security and comfort. May be one should simply tear apart all unreal images of ideal egos and cover all mirrors. May be one should consciously open the eyes wide and see that on the other side of billboards and mirrors there is just an empty surface. Security, comfort and possibly happiness (why not believe in it?) are at an arm's reach, if we stop looking at images and start feeling what it is to be three dimensional people.

Notes

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings - The Fellowship of the Ring*.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings - The Fellowship of the Ring*.

³ Which in extreme cases is called dismorphophobia.

⁴ As Rorschach inkblots to psychology.

⁵ The word scry (while skry is a form of out of body projection or astral travel) means to describe, notice or perceive what is hidden. This reading is possible with the use of a tool generally called specula, which assumes different forms from crystal balls, to clear crystals, still water, polished mirrors, black ink, oiled surfaces, hematite and polished steel. According to the surface used there is a term to describe the art: such as catoptromancy for mirrors, crystallomancy for crystals and crystal bawls, hydromancy for still water surfaces, lecanomancy which associates the drop of precious stones into a bowl or liquid, macharomancy for knives and sword plades and onychomancy for fingernail.

⁶ *Treatise on Painting, Codex Urbinas Latinus*, 1270.

⁷ The so-called anamorphosis.

⁸ While other mirrors, called rear-views, allow the observation of things outside the normal field of vision.

⁹ To Hofstadter, the self is formed when it can reflect itself.

¹⁰ Jung, *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, 1935.

¹¹ Jung, *Analytical Psychology and Weltanschauung*, 1928.

¹⁵ Another perspective is given by Solomon Ibn Gabirol according to which the mirror represents the light of true understanding: the imprint of form in matter, meaning the creation of all things by the Creator, is like the return of the form of one who is gazing in the mirror.

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