

Mirror, Mirror

Leslie Robinson, Faculty of Fine Arts and Communication, MacEwan University
email: robinson126@macewan.ca

Abstract

Like with so many other everyday things that become extensions of ourselves, we experience the mirror—in that look and see moment—routinely and habitually. With unfaltering precision the mirror captures my face, immediately copying it back for me to examine. We owe, in part, our visual perceptions of self to the mirror’s convenient and ready-at-hand presence. Yet, is there not more to the mirror than relentless reflection? Looking to poetic, mythical and experiential accounts of the mirror reveal how it can surprise, jolt, distort, fool, engulf or otherwise interpolate us. In this way, our encounters with the mirror seem to manifest variously and differentially. It is at once there and not there, tangible and intangible, solid and transparent, and truthful and deceitful.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, Mirror, Thing, Truth, Fallacy*

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. Whatever you see I swallow immediately. Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike. I am not cruel, only truthful.

—Sylvia Plath (n.d.)

In her poem, *Mirror*, Sylvia Plath *is* the mirror. She is the “silver and exact” reflective matter that absorbs our looks. With “no preconceptions”, she takes us in as we are and spits us back all the same. While Plath, as mirror, insists she is “not cruel,” mirrors strike me otherwise. Forever flashing back the scar above my right eyebrow, the mirror perpetuates a dark memory I cannot escape. In the Brothers Grimm fairytale, *Snow White*, the maleficent queen is horrified to learn from her magic mirror that she is no longer the fairest in the land. As the queen’s envy grows, she calls for Snow White’s heart to be wrenched from her young breast. Evocative of the evil powers of vanity, this tale also suggests that the mirror *itself* is neither vain nor evil. Rather the mirror is “only truthful” (Plath, n.d.). Any judgment, interpretation or recognition of “beauty” or other quality witnessed in its silvery pool belongs to the eye of the mirror’s beholder. Yet what does a mirror reveal to us?

Reflecting back on my scar, I consider again the mirror’s claim to truthfulness. The mirror

shows me the scar above my left eyebrow, but it is really over the right one. Even for Marilyn Monroe, a mirror would have flipped her famous beauty mark from one cheek to the other. In the carnival's House of Mirrors, not only do we see ourselves inverted, we are squeezed, stretched, and twisted as mirrors play with who we think we are or imagine ourselves to be. Yet do the mirror's powers begin and end in its unfailing capacity to reflect back, to imitate with silvered precision or with wild distortions the "real me"?

For the mirror to reveal its "truths"—inverted, distorted, or otherwise—it must first be triggered by a look, a glance, or even the most fleeting glimpse out of the corner of one's eye. In the very moment our eyes attend to the image caught in the mirror, the mirror stares back at us without the slightest hesitation. Looking into a mirror, we do not usually see the mirror but ourselves. Of course, we can also look at the mirror itself, its bare physicality, and examine its shiny flat surface and frame. Paradoxically, the mirror is both solid and transparent. Yet it is not transparent in the same way as a window. The window provides an opening to the outside world from one's inner sanctum (Bollnow, 2011, p. 151). It also gives entry to our inner space from the outside world—this is when we may draw the curtains to keep our privacy. Whether from outside in or inside out, the window's transparency silently declares the boundary between the spectator and the spectacle. But a mirror's transparency merges the inner viewer with its outside viewer. It has no tangible or visible out or other side, rather it provides only a precise reflection of "this side." But is this really so?

The young hunter Narcissus crouches before a mirrored pool, beholding and beholden to an enchanting figure. This spellbinding beauty is of course his own reflected image. According to myth, the youth still stares at his beloved today, eternally transfixed by his mirrored self. The mirror may seduce us with Narcissusian promises of realities we cannot quite touch. Or perhaps we encounter a mirror more like Alice in Lewis Carroll's (1871) *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. We may not only look *into* the mirror, but also *through* it to discover other worlds. As such, the mirror seems to hold a mystical or otherworldly capacity able to transport our thoughts, senses and emotions to imaginaries where vanity, scrutiny, obsession, fantasy, and other human tendencies may seize hold. A mirror may pull us away from our quotidian world, diverting or otherwise capturing our attention as we fixate, if only momentarily, on a more reflective albeit engrossing view of one's self. We are caught by mirrors and pulled into their world.

A mirror is usually part of our morning routine. Standing before it, we find ourselves as selves looking back. In it, we "check" ourselves, imagining the self that others will see, or rather the mirror opposite. Baring our teeth, we examine them. Teeth clean? Hair in place? We may practice a smile or a wink, searching for an extra dose of confidence. We may change our proximity to it, relying on its exactness to guide our grooming habits: razor across face, curling iron curled in close, eye pencil across lids, or tweezers to chin and brow. Without a mirror we may never see our faces so clearly and precisely. We may live "in" our bodies but without a mirror, we may not formalize how our body appears to another. Would we feel more or less, if at all, attractive or self-conscious if we only had other people's responses to us to go by? Without a mirror, would we be so concerned or fascinated by our own "appearance"? Living in a world where we encounter mirrors and reflective surfaces, our "inner self" is necessarily convened, reminded of, and confronted by our "outer self" on a regular basis.

A mirror's reflection attracts us to it. Walking through the mall, it can be difficult to resist the temptation to look: each reflection calls out to us to consider how we appear: How is my lipstick? Oh no, my shirt is kind of tight—perhaps I should buy another one? In a store we might

want to try on a jacket, yet there is no mirror so the bargain remains on the rack. A mirror can make us confident that we have chosen the right jacket. Or, it may tell us it is the wrong cut or colour. Small children may play in front of a mirror, making faces and funny dances with their double. They might touch the mirror trying to reach out to their equally curious counterparts. As we grow up, we may learn to look into a mirror until the mirrored image of the self that we perceive becomes an inseparable and irresistible aspect of who we are.

Sometimes a mirror surprises, startles or disturbs. Stepping into an unfamiliar dark room at night, I glimpse something move and I jump. Then I realize it was only my own reflection that frightened me. Entering into a fancy restaurant it can feel like the space is much larger and more populated than it really is. When we do not recognize the mirror for what it is, reflecting what we are, we see into it without looking to do so. On these unexpected occasions, the mirror's precision, or at times distortion, can fool us. We might take the reflection for the real, like a bird that mistakes a window for the open sky. Or conversely, the mirror may grab hold of our imagination as we take the real for something else. In the most fleeting of glimpses, a mirror's reflection may trigger an illusion or jolt us with a "truthful" surprise. My mother recalls a startling moment that altered her self perception:

Just out of the tub and walking to my room, out of the corner of my eye I saw this lady, an old lady. She was walking beside me. I thought, oh it's my Mom. But, no, it was not my Mom. It was me! That's when it hit me—I am old.

In such epiphanic moments, the mirror invites us to re-encounter our selves, and to welcome or reject what was previously unthought, unnoticed or even denied. In our mirrored reflection, we may trace our lingering past or our frozen future. Whether we like or not, the image in the mirror, the "truthful" reflection of our appearance, may enmesh and engulf us—as we are and who we are destined to become.

In the last lines of Plath's poem, the mirror declares:

I am important to her. She comes and goes. Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness. In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Perhaps somewhere beyond each *coming and going* double, beneath the intangible underside of our mirrors, lurks a "terrible fish", or a Narcissus of the netherworld, or an aged but wiser self, waiting for the right moment to play with our self-perceptions by beckoning our *false truths* and *true fallacies*—in each ever-irresistible temptation of looking back.

Dedication

For my mother, and my mother's mother, with gratitude for their shared wisdom.

References

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