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Abstract

Why has humankind approached the mirror with both awe and trepidation? What is a mirror and what does it do? If posed fundamentally, the questions yield answers more complicated than one might expect...

Keywords

mirror, reflections, awe, trepidation

Reflections and Refractions: The Mirror

Introduction

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Mirrors would do well to reflect a little before
throwing back images.
Jean Cocteau, *Des Beaux-Arts*

Why has humankind approached the mirror with both awe and trepidation? What is a mirror and what does it do? If posed fundamentally, the questions yield answers more complicated than one might expect. Dictionary definitions intimate the mirror's multiple cultural functions and associations throughout centuries,¹ prodigiously displayed not only in everyday life, where the mirror can transform one's sense of space and transpose one's face, but also in myth, literature, painting, and film. The Random House College Dictionary, in consensus with the majority of other sources, including the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster's, lists five meanings for the noun: (1) a reflecting surface, usually of glass with a metal or amalgam backing and set in a frame; (2) any reflecting surface, as the surface of calm water; (3) a surface that is either plane, concave, or convex and that reflects rays of light; (4) something that gives a faithful representation; (5) a pattern for imitation; exemplar. While the first definition confines itself to mundane denotation, the second ineluctably evokes the myth of Narcissus and concepts of narcissism; the third—which chiefly though by no means solely concerns optics—and fifth conjure up religious iconography; and the fourth colludes with the contentious trope of artistic representation as “holding the mirror up to nature” (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*)² or

serving as a “mirror that walks along the highway” (Stendhal),³ and numerous variations on imaginative creativity’s purported mimetic fidelity to tangible phenomena (the real world). Etymologically derived from the Old French (*mir-* [to see] + *-eo(u)r*; Latin *mirari* [to marvel, to wonder at]), the mirror resides in the complex spheres of vision/perspective/optics. Its symbolic significance, however, extends far beyond those domains.⁴ Not just as object, but also as polyvalent trope and concept, the mirror has enabled a dramatically new vision of the world and our place in it.

Multipurpose, abounding in cultural resonances, and rewardingly intricate as a phenomenon for analysis across sundry disciplines, the mirror as both wide-ranging trope and concrete object of practical usefulness has inspired architects, astronomers, designers, film directors, painters, physicists, psychoanalysts, theologians, urban planners, and writers, who have extrapolated creatively from its equivocal properties. As the definitions cited above indicate, the capacity to reflect or reproduce constitutes a principal component of the mirror, and the polysemy of these verbs mainly accounts for the ease with which the mirror-as-trope trespasses across various ontological and symbolic boundaries. This rhetorical versatility enables its meaning as verbal or visual representation, replication, and doubling of some aspect of reality: thus a still life, a portrait, and an autobiography are said to mirror objects and human subjects, just as a *Doppelgänger* ‘double’ externalizes (reflects) a psychological state of dissociation, as in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s stories and Dostoevsky’s *Double* (1846) as well as, contrarily, in Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage in personality formation. Furthermore, the inward movement stimulates rumination—that is, reflection of another sort, or *speculum* as speculation—while raising a series of epistemological issues: perception and perspective, illumination, subject-object relations, and so forth. Approaches to the image in the mirror seem infinite and some actually engage infinity, inasmuch as a hardy tradition in religious discourse equates God with the perfect mirror, in whose image humankind allegedly was created. That brand of thought imbues the mirror’s physical presence with metaphysical implications. Indeed, any study of mimesis, reflection, and the image is at the mercy of centuries-long theses, practices, and pleasures inseparable from the mirror’s contradictory features.

Anyone seeking a thorough and nuanced treatment of the topic could consult Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's *Mirror: A History* (1994/2001), which stands out from other monographs in the expanding scholarship on the mirror as a cultural phenomenon by virtue of its acuity, intellectual flair, and comprehensiveness. Our purview in the following five essays is geographically more modest, largely though not entirely restricted to Russia. We probe Russians' protracted romance with the mirror and its diverse roles from the medieval era to the present in the context of everyday life (Chadaga, Petrov), film (Chadaga), literature (Chadaga, Lodge, Petrov, Sarsenov), folklore rituals (Lodge, Goscilo), and art (Goscilo). While varying in scope and emphases, our discussions inevitably overlap, particularly in noting the mirror's ambiguities, shifting significance, and evolving status throughout the ages. Aided by technological advances, the mirror underwent radical changes in form, cost, and context. Its history as tool and trope in Russia both parallels and deviates from that of its West European counterparts, and we observe a hallowed convention of Slavic Studies by endeavoring to register Russia's *sui generis* as well as its universal trajectory in that history.

We thank the following individuals and institutions for granting permission to reproduce the visuals accompanying the essays by Chadaga, Lodge, and Goscilo: Ol'ga Bulgakova, Sergey Dolya, Matthew Thrasher, the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Mospromstroy in Moscow, and the pertinent photographers who generously posted their photographic images on wikimedia for public use.

Notes

1 See Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* for a history of mirrors in the ancient world, among the Chinese, Egyptians, Etruscans, Persians, Romans, etc.

2 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (III.ii.17-19). Hamlet here refers to the play-within-a-play, intended to "expose the truth" through staged drama as a mirror of "reality."

3 "Un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route" is Stendhal's definition of the novel in *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830; Vol. 2, Chapt. xix), presumably in its Realist form, though this assailable criterion hardly obtains in his

own novels, steeped in Romanticism and closer to the lamp than the mirror as theorized by M.H. Abrams in his 1953 study, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*.

4 Among mirror types is the Claude Lorrain mirror, a slightly convex mirror of black glass named after the seventeenth-century landscape painter, purportedly enabled artists to achieve the effects for which he was renowned.