

# SELF-REFLECTION: THE ART AND SCIENCE

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**T**he mirror: a vehicle for reflection, purveyor of truth and master of illusion – familiar, strange, loved and reviled in equal

measure. Our relationship with the mirror is impossibly intimate, often troubled, yet inextricably entwined with our sense of who we are.

This shiny piece of glass toys with our emotions and our behaviour. We turn to it for assurance and it soothes us or disappoints us. Our reflected self is ephemeral, altered by lighting, the shape of the glass; coloured by our own emotional state and what we tell ourselves we're seeing. And yet it's so difficult to call any mirror out in a lie; we're conditioned to believe that its truth is unfailing.

The looking-glass is the window to our physical selves; the people around us and the wider world will mirror our internal selves. We use these mirrors in synchrony to recognise ourselves, to define ourselves, and sometimes to find ourselves.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF SELF-AWARENESS

Our first mirrors, as tiny infants, are our immediate caregivers; the people who hold us and gaze at us and reflect our emotions back to us with love and interest. According to psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, our sense of self is not innate, but is acquired through the process of 'mirroring' that occurs within nurturing interactions with others. Positive mirroring, Winnicott says, forms the foundation for a stable sense of self and allows an infant to feel worthy of love.

Most paradigms comprising psychology and psychiatry nod to a variation on the thesis that babies' emergent sense of self is nurtured and allowed to flourish in the reflected gaze of their caregivers. Without the affirming influence of mirroring at this crucial stage of development, a child is unable to sufficiently organise its sense of identity. It is through mirroring that we learn to regulate and integrate emotions – happiness, sadness, love –

and are able to then share and reflect these with others as we grow and move through life.

While the mirroring of caregivers gives a child its first sense of self, the full realisation of our individuality happens when we first learn to recognise ourselves in the looking-glass. This cognitive milestone generally occurs between the ages of 15 and 24 months, and signals the ability to distinguish ourselves as separate from those around us – a fundamental step in becoming a social being.

Even as adults we require positive mirroring. When we look to the faces of loved ones, our feelings are affirmed in their reflected expressions, words and actions. We feel secure and validated, and in turn can share this positivity with others. The same can be said of what we reflect back onto our mirror-selves: are we maintaining our identity and sense of self-worth with sympathetic mirroring, or are we critical and dismissive?

Tara Well, an associate professor of psychology at Barnard College in New York, has been researching a mirror meditation technique that is based on the concept of positively mirroring ourselves. "When I teach mirror meditation, I encourage people to look not at the flaws of the person they see in the mirror, but to look into the eyes of the person who is suffering in the receiving of this unkind, and sometimes even cruel, self-scrutiny." Over time, she says, this helps us "relax self-criticism and develop kinder self-awareness".

However, the very mechanics behind visual self-recognition lead to the realisation that we are seen and viewed by others; an experience that French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty described as disconcerting. Philippe Rochat, Professor of Psychology at Emory University, elaborates on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of mirror self-experience thus: "When seeing myself in the mirror, I am seeing myself as others see me.... In fact, not only am I seeing myself as others see me, I am also seeing myself as if I was an other."

This uneasy relationship with the mirror often remains: when we regard ourselves in the looking-glass, we see ourselves not for who we truly are, but as we assume others would see us. We're suddenly aware of being judged on our visible, external selves. We self-objectify; we become self-conscious.

## PRESENTATION AND CONTROL

This self-consciousness, it is argued, is central to the human experience. "We care how we look," writes Rochat. "This simple proposition defines us as a uniquely self-conscious species. No other animals dwell on appearance like we do." He goes on to point out: "If we care how we look, it is primarily for social reasons.... We care about how we look with others in mind. It is a deliberate attempt at controlling how others perceive us, how we project the self to the outside world."

At the most basic level, we need the looking-glass to guide us in our self-presentation, and to reassure us that our outward appearance is sending the right visual information about ourselves to those around us. A British study commissioned by Simple Skincare in 2012 showed that women check their reflections around eight times a day, mostly to touch up their hair and makeup. A similar survey in 2015 had women checking in with the mirror up to 16 times a day – and men 23 times.

Autumn Whitefield-Madrano, author of *Face Value: The Hidden Ways Beauty Shapes Women's Lives*, describes this mirror-checking as "surveillance". "The mirror is a quest for control," she says. "Control over the image we present to the world...control over fitting the beauty standard, to a degree. Mostly though, [mirror] surveillance is an effort to carefully control our ideas about ourselves."

## PERCEPTION AND REALITY

According to mid-century psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, we spend our lives seeking our 'ideal I' in the mirror: that there's an ever-present disconnect between the reality of what we see (what we are), and what we imagine ourselves to be (what we wish to see). The concept is illustrated in studies showing that the presence of a mirror in a room will alter the occupants' behaviour in positive ways: they'll work harder, be more helpful, less likely to succumb to stereotype-based judgementalism. The mirror encourages us to be our best selves: to strive towards the ideal.

But what happens when striving towards the 'ideal' or 'best self' becomes more about how we look than how we think, act and treat others? As we place more and more value on the aesthetic component of ourselves, with the 'ideal' airbrushed to unnatural, unattainable perfection, we find ourselves in danger of the mirror becoming our enemy.

"Our diet culture and the world being so appearance-obsessed means that from a very young age we kind of go outside our body and start scrutinising our appearance," says Sydney-based clinical psychologist and creator of *Untrapped.com.au*, Louise Adams. In this situation, the mirror is allowed to dictate our emotions: if the disconnect between our appraisal of our reflected image and our imagined ideal is too large, we experience dissatisfaction.

The idealised aesthetic, the outer, has become intertwined with how we measure our inner worth as a person. "As females, we're socialised that our appearance is our worth," says Adams. "If we think we look good, we feel like we are good. Our self-esteem is high if our body image is high and our self-esteem is low if our body image is low."

It could be argued that this dissatisfaction with our reflected selves, and the urge to base our self-worth purely on what can be seen in the mirror, is a symptom of Winnicott's mirroring gone awry – at

a broader, more destructive level. Our culture, rather than nurturing us with positive reinforcement, is reflecting back fictional images of physicality to which we must aspire, the overriding message being that appearances are everything, and if we don't measure up physically, we don't measure up full-stop.

## OPTICAL DELUSIONS

It's a commonly held misconception that the mirror never lies. But as magicians and illusionists have known for centuries, the mirror is in fact an instrument of supreme deception. It works in cunning synchrony with light and shadow and angles to conceal, reveal, and reflect fanciful versions of reality back into our gullible eyes.

Consider the ground-breaking use of mirror therapy in medicine, which can help alleviate phantom limb pain in amputees. The amputated limb is visually replaced with a reflection, which tricks the brain into thinking the limb is still present. This technique is also used to help stroke patients regain movement. The mechanics behind it are complicated, but, essentially, the brain sees the affected limb moving, pain free, and

the body responds to this reality.

What this tells us is that what we see in the mirror – or what we *think* we see in the mirror – our brain reads as reality. And herein lies their immense power. In 2013, an American woman named Belinda Jasmine suddenly discovered that her bedroom mirror was making her appear heavier and shorter than she was. "It was distorting my image and negatively affecting how I felt about my body," she writes. The realisation that she had been 'tricked' by her mirror drove her to create the 'Skinny Mirror' – a looking-glass that, with just a slight warp of its surface, visually slims the reflection.

"When I first saw my reflection in the Skinny Mirror prototype...I stood up taller, felt more attractive...I actually *liked* what I saw in the mirror," Jasmine writes on her website.

Fast-forward several years and the Skinny Mirror is now showing in a shop fitting room near you. Why? Because seeing that slimmed-down version of yourself has been

scientifically proven to loosen your purse strings. A 2014 study conducted in Sweden by Linn Gustafsson revealed that women who tried on underwear and swimmers in front of a Skinny Mirror purchased 20 per cent more than the women whose fitting rooms had a 'normal' mirror.

While the Skinny Mirror is a relative newcomer to the retail landscape, consumer psychology specialist Dr Cathrine Jansson-Boyd says this kind of visual chicanery has been going on for decades, with clever marketers hanging fitting room mirrors on a slight angle, artfully lit to smooth and elongate our reflections.

So why is this sales technique so effective? "The [slim-illusion mirrors] basically make us see what we want to see," says Jansson-Boyd. "Most people go and buy new clothes because they *want* to look attractive and they also have a need to believe that they *are* attractive. The Skinny Mirror therefore reinforces their own self-concept and temporarily makes them feel better." In other words, it gives us a tantalising glimpse of our – albeit culturally informed – 'ideal' self.

It should be noted that what's seen in the Skinny Mirror is still our self.



## Self-reflection: the art and science



While the image will be different to the one we habitually view at home, we are the only ones telling ourselves that this version is in fact the better one. We are so beholden to the physical 'ideal' that's reflected back at us from every shiny screen and surface that we unconsciously reinforce it when self-mirroring.

## REFLECTION V OBJECTIFICATION

Sometimes we can't appreciate, or fully understand, the true value of something until it's been taken away. In May 2011, Whitefield-Madrano embarked on the first of two month-long mirror 'fasts', motivated by a desire to reduce her feelings of self-consciousness.

So what happens when you take away the mirror? Whitefield-Madrano made some surprising discoveries. She realised she doesn't have to "strive to look pretty every minute"; she wore her glasses more and makeup less. "I rarely felt pretty or unpretty; I just didn't care as much."

However, she also missed the "private joy of observing myself in a certain light", and seeing herself dressed up in a favourite outfit. The self-objectification of the mirror, it turns out, can also be a source of pleasure.

More importantly, though, the experiment gave her a new perspective on how to use mirrors. "One, as a portal to a momentary, unspoken truth about my emotional

state; and two, as a tool to enhance my actual appearance, sort of a technical usage (like, it's hard to put on liquid eyeliner without it). "In the years since [the mirror fasts], that's been the number-one takeaway I've had – affirming that the mirror is an indicator of something beyond a mere reflection. If I have a day where I feel like I look particularly bad – or particularly good – I understand it as an indicator, not as a sentence in and of itself...I know not to place too much stock in the feelings I had projected onto it before the experiment. I know that whatever truth lies within those feelings or reactions isn't a truth about how I actually look."

For all its mystique, the mirror is nothing more than a passive observer of our daily lives. We are the ones who ascribe importance and meaning to what it reflects back at us. Just as every mirror will tell us a slightly different story, it's also true that the same mirror will reflect back different versions of ourselves on any given day: what we are feeling inside translates to what we see on the outside.

As Whitefield-Madrano suggests, should we attempt to seek validation in the mirror, we would be wise to place more value on our reflection's ability to describe our emotional state rather than allowing the mirror to dictate it.