SELF-REFLECTION: THE ART AND SCIENCE

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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 animal displays our 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 revealed that men 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 22 times.

Amanda Whitfield-Madura, author of Fine 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.

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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 see), and what we imagine ourselves to be (what we wish to see). The concept is illustrated in studies showing that the perceived image of a mirror in a room will alter the occupants' behaviour in ways they'll work harder, be more helpful, less likely to succumb to stereotype-based judgmentalism. The mirror encourages us to be our best selves - to strive towards the ideal. But if we're always striving towards the 'ideal' or 'best self' becomes almost like how we look than how we think, act, and treat other? As we place more and more value on the aesthetic component of ourselves, with the 'ideal' sublimated 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 learned the art of using the mirror as an escape mechanism," says Sydney-based clinical psychologist and creator of Listgapped.com.au, Louise Adams. In this situation, the mirror is allowed to dictate our emotions and disconnect between our reflection of our perceived image and our imagined ideal is too large, we experience dissatisfaction. The idealised aesthetic, the outer, has become internalised with how we measure our inner worth as a person. So for someone who internalised 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 reflection selves, and the urge to be our self-worth purely on what can be seen in the mirror, is a symptom of Wiikinnott's mirroring gone away - at a broader, more destructive level. Our culture, rather than nurturing us with culture, rather than nurturing us with positive reinforcement, is reflecting back fictional images of physicality to which we must ascribe the overlying 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. Some trick them with light in coming to sight with light and shade and angles technical, reveal, and reflect fanciful versions of reality back into our gullible eyes. Consider the ground-breaking work 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 hence, lies their immense power. In 2013, an American woman named Bethla Khajoezly 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 wrote. The realisation that she had been 'tricked' by her mirror drew her to create the 'Skinny Mirror' - a looking-glass that, with just a slight warp of its surface, visually slims the reflection. "When first saw my reflection in the Skinny Mirror prototypes, I stood up taller, felt more attractive. I actually liked what I saw in the mirror," Jasmine wrote 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 2004 study conducted in Sweden by Linna Grestafsson revealed that women who tried on underwear and swimsuits 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 Catriona Janssen-Boyd says this kind of visual cherished has been going on for decades, with marketers hanging fitting room mirrors on a slight angle, artfully lit to smooth and elongate our reflections. So why is this rule technique so effective? The [thin-Illusion mirrors] basically make us see what we want to see," says Janssen-Boyd. "Most people go and buy new clothes because they feel more confident, 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-

While the image will be different to the one we habitually view at home, we are the only ones telling ourselves that the version is in fact, the better one. We are so beholden to the physical 'ideal' that's reflected back at us from every shiny surface 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 2013, Whitefield Madrano embarked on the first of two month-long mirror "fests", 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 momentarily, unspoken truth about my emotional state; and two, as a tool to enhance my actual appearance, sort of a technical image (like, it's hard to put on liquid eyeliner without it). "It the years since the mirror fests", that's been the number-one takeaway I've had - affirming that the mirror is an indicator of something beyond a more 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 end 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 emotions isn't a truth about how I actually look."

For all its mystery, the mirror is nothing more than a passive observer of our daily lives. We are the ones who acquire 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're feeling inside translates to what we see on the outside.

As Whitefield-Madrano says, 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. 

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