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Dear friends,

I thought
that you would enjoy
this fascinating paper.

Best,

Juan

Reflections on Looking into Mirrors¹

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Half asleep (on the plane) I looked out into the night and saw my father's face looking in squinting, trying to see something. I sat up. But of course it was my own face, my reflection in the glass squinting, trying to see something looking out.

Michael J. Arlen Passage to Ararat

In this room a mirror has been hung in the background in order to duplicate the distance of observation. If we look at the floor it is easy to persuade ourselves that it is a continuation of the one we occupy as spectators...the sensation of relief is absolute.

A.J. Onieva The Prado Gallery
A Museum Guide--
Comment on Velasquez'
Las Meninas

The Ancestor in Everyman

On my passage out to Equatorial Africa in 1958 I had occasion to pass through Madrid and return once again to visit the Prado. I there spent, like so many visitors, considerable time in the room devoted to the famous picture by Velasquez: Las Meninas (The Ladies in Waiting)². In this picture there is a subtle play of mirrors both within the picture and by means of an actual large mirror set up in the small room entirely devoted to the canvas. The trick--the duplicity--in the duplication of mirrors is to persuade the observer that he is part of the scene figured....a gathering of the Spanish royal family. I have always had difficulty in suspending the disbelief of visual, not to mention social and historical distance, long enough to enjoy this effect.

Baileu
Here's looking at
you! Please comment--
the last part may
need a bit of ex-
plaining. Jim

And, contrary to the guidebook, the sensation of relief I experienced was that of leaving the room and my frustrating efforts to get into the gestalt of the thing--feel my speculating figure grounded, as it were, in the Royal Chambers of Philip the Fourth. One could even, and I suppose that this is the main available sensation, be identified with the royal couple themselves. For it is they who are reflected in the mirror in the painting in such a way as to seem to be occupying the position of the spectator. If the trick works, and I am told that it often does, the mirror should show the king and queen in every man and woman.

These frustrations in obtaining objective self-awareness in a seventeenth century scene may account for the exceptional interest I subsequently took in a feature of initiation into the Mbiri-Bwiti religious movement complex among the Fang of Western Equatorial Africa.³ Initiation into this movement is achieved by the ingestion of large amounts of the psychotropic plant, eboga (Tabernenthe iboga).⁴ The visionary excursions produced by higher levels of dosage are sufficient unto themselves in many chapels. But often the initiation is aided by placing a mirror on the ground some six to eight feet directly before the initiate who is also sitting spread-legged upon the ground. Sometimes the mirror will carry a design in white paint, an "X" or a facelike configuration, and sometimes it will be unmarked. It is never so completely marked that the initiate cannot make out his own face reflected in the mirror.

A significant moment in initiation comes when the initiate, now deeply under the influence of eboga, recognizes his or her ancestor or troubling spirit in the virtual image of the mirror. He recognizes "Bwiti," as it is said. It is a moment of singular import for the initiate may well have been staring intently, often leaning forward in a strained position, for several

hours. What was his or her face or ambiguous mark becomes transformed into the significant other with whom the religion or curing cult is seeking to come into communication. When the other is finally seen, there is always some question whether the initiation will work, the relief is indeed absolute. For the initiate, his initiation confirmed by this manifestation, can now pass on to a new state of being--that of incumbent of the chapel or "angel" (Banzie). Having seen the ancestor, the initiate can now be removed to a chamber outside the ceremonial arena where, stupified and soon falling asleep, he can continue his visionary excursion in the land of the dead.⁵

Inevitably there are various explanations for this phase of the initiation. Some members of these movements say that the ancestor or afflicting spirit has come directly into the mirror out of the ground. Others say that the ancestor simply manifests himself in the mirror. Others say that the event is indicative of the stage in the ingestion of eboga in which the initiate can no longer see the things of this world. One subtle-minded informant said that the initiate was really seeing himself but that this was what the religion was really all about--the enabling of one to see oneself more clearly, more at a distance as it were. The self-objectification by means of a mirror to which this informant seems to be referring is compatible, incidentally, with the sense of distancing from self--or at least the sense of observing one's own body from a distance--produced as a psychoreaction to the eboga plant,⁶ which as Bwitists say produces the sense of "I am here and my body is there."

In any event no member offered the explanation which I think is the most fruitful one: this is the explanation that the trick of the mirror accomplished an identification of the dead ancestor behind the looking glass and the living descendant before it. If there was not an identification,

there was at least a recognition that the one and the other were reflections of each other--a condition essentially true for cultures like the Fang which emphasize geneological continuities between the living and the dead and reject any sense of pronounced discontinuity.⁷ Indeed these religious movements are seeking to reestablish continuities between the living and the dead--continuities disturbed by the missionary attack upon the immanence of ancestors and by other secularization and de-personalizing processes of the colonial world. More than the colonial, perhaps it is the modern world! For these processes of "dis-continuity" surely were at work on Michael Arlen, to refer to our other epigraph, animating him to fly back to Ararat in search of his Armenian ancestry. And his is only the most notable of much recent literature in search of "ethnic communion."

African Uses of Mirrors and Other Reflecting Surfaces

There is precedence for this use of mirrors in Western Equatorial Africa. Among Fang themselves mirrors were sometimes used in ancestral cult initiations....after, however, rather than before collapse from hallucinatory drug taking. (In the Fang ancestral cult the plant was not tabernthe eboga but alchornea floribunda; malan). When the initiate had collapsed, he was rushed from the village into the forest precincts and revived. Behind him the skulls of the ancestors were taken out of the reliquaries and placed on a platform. When the initiate was sufficiently revived, he was propped up before a mirror in such a way as to see the skulls reflected in it. He would later be shown the skulls directly and he would participate in their washing. It was felt that if he were first directly shown the skulls the shock would be too great. In point of fact, the reflection of the skulls in the mirrors seems to have had more psychological effect than direct viewing.

The use of mirrors for religious purposes among the equatorial west coast has been long remarked particularly among the Loango or Bavili (Pechuel Loesch, 1907 passim and Dennet 1906:30,51;84) where magical mirrors were used by diviners and where the light thrown from mirrors was felt to have grievous consequences. Reliquary and other religious figurines often had bits of mirrors embedded in them with the intention, very likely, of protecting them and adding to their power. Trilles (1932:178-180) argues that the origin of this mirror use may well lie with the pygmées and their use of the magic mirror (although surely mirror use in this part of Africa must be traced to very early contact with Europeans as well as to the belief that the dead dwelt at the bottom of streams, lakes, and pools--behind or beneath reflective surfaces, as it were). Among western equatorial pygmees Trilles says the mirror was used in divination in order to conjure up the more or less distinct physiognomie of the guilty party, the enemy of the patient. The face would be less distinct because the pygmées employed a polished piece of copper. Before the acquisition of this metal they employed a very still pool of water deep in the forest--"fontaine des esprits"--for reflective divination. This practice is re-interpreted in the Bwiti religion which regards such deep forest pools as the sites where the souls of the newborn are first sent before they are conceived in the womb. Pebbles representing souls are fished out of these pools and transported into the chapel house. Fang have long believed that the essential self is seen in water reflection (Tessman 1913,II.35), particularly in still pools.

Trilles also discusses the consecration of the pygmees mirror. It is consecrated to the all seeing sun which sees everything and some of whose all seeing light is confined in the mirror for future use. But there is surprisingly little ethnographic data on the use of mirrors from elsewhere

in Africa. Since the earliest use of mirrors seems to have been in Egypt, there has long been opportunity for diffusion into the rest of Africa. This opportunity is enhanced by widespread Islamic beliefs--similar to those in Europe--that the mirror image is the embodiment of the soul and hence to be avoided, particularly at times of funerals when one's own soul might be stolen away by the departing. Among Zulu who divined traditionally by dark reflecting pools and who regarded, it is said (Callaway 1868:342ff), any reflecting surface with respect if not awe, the custom still persists, it is my personal experience, of covering or turning mirrors to the wall during lightning storms lest the mortal bolt of such a supernatural event be reflected directly into living quarters. There was also the belief among Zulu and other southern Nguni that a mirror properly adjusted to reflect the heavens could kill enemy warriors.

There is plentiful evidence for the use of mirrors elsewhere in the world, particularly in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific....also in aboriginal America. Among the Plains Indians, for example, mirror boards were used in war expeditions to make the bearer as difficult to capture or injure as light from a mirror and latterly they were employed in the sun dance and Ghost Dance (Kroeber:1907,356). A review of the motifs involving mirrors gathered by Stith Thompson (1958; Index Volume,509) shows worldwide provenience from Japan through Siberia to Iceland. The mirror apparently, perhaps because of the "trickiness" we discuss below, is a device which easily becomes a repository of significance--a collective representation. But what it represents is, characteristically, variable from culture to culture....transformations perhaps on basic themes. Thus in English, French, Welsh, and Italian folktales the devil appears when a woman looks at herself

in a mirror after sunset. In Jewish tales the same theme is transformed and the mirror acts as a chastity index justly reflecting the degree of a woman's devilishness. Similarly, while in the English tradition a broken mirror is an evil omen, in Armenia and Japan a mirror gradually grows dark as an individual's life prospects dim. In either case the state of the mirror is tied up with the fate, health, and future of he or she whom it reflects. Thus God or Saint Peter or other "weighers of souls" can make use of a mirror on the judgment day. For it will faithfully reflect the virtues or vices of the spectator's life.

The mirrors' self-sufficient tricks also provoke the playful or absurd in folktales: tales where characters stand in front of a mirror with their eyes shut to see how they look when they are asleep or where they take mirrors to bed to see if they sleep with their mouths open. In cabalistic thought there are the seven mirrors for each day of the week dedicated to each of the seven planets. Of different reflective surfaces, they are consulted for different purposes. Tuesday's Mars mirror of iron is consulted as to imminent enmities and lawsuits. Friday's Venus mirror of copper is consulted as to questions of love.

Of course, the literature and folklore of exploration and western expansion is replete with accounts of native amusement or amazement upon first setting eyes on European mirrors--pocket reflecting pools as they must have seemed. But this literature, often quite elaborated, lacks ethnographic value and may reflect, as much as anything, the mirroring effect that Europeans themselves were encountering amidst strangely familiar men and women in barbarous climes.

The Mirror's Tricks

Mirrors play, at least, two tricks. They reverse the horizontal plane

while maintaining the vertical and they give the see-through effect. That is, they locate, as anyone who has tried to photograph a mirror knows, the virtual image as far back of the mirror, apparently, as the objects in view are in front of it. These tricks act to create an interesting arousal and state of wonder susceptible, as we see, to a wide variety of cultural uses. One may speculate to begin with that human reactions to mirrors have something to do with the principle of bi-lateral symmetry in organisms by which the left side of an animal is a mirror image of the right. At the same time organisms usually do not develop their two sides symmetrically but, in fact, give emphasis to one or another side. An example is the prevalence of right or left-hand dominance in humans. Arousal in the presence of mirrors would arise then--this is the speculation--from the fact that an acquired sidedness, often painfully enforced by culture, is apparently reversed. The effect is that of having a dualism which has been resolved in dominance suddenly reversed--transformed by the transitory reassertion of the basic fact of symmetry. The world is transformed without being turned upside down.

The reversal of an otherwise identical representation--what is called the enantiomorphic effect (Ogden:1967)--has been suggestive as a metaphor for the condition of the dead particularly in societies which emphasize their continuity and similarity with the living. Among the Cuicatec of Central America, for example, Eva Hunt shows us the enantiomorphic relationship between the present time and space of the living and the past time and space of the dead (Hunt:1976). Though the one is visible and the other invisible they are reflections of each other--that is to say, identical but reversed. The effect is very much like that of walking on top of a mirror--the living of this world moving about above and the dead of the past and future world walking upside down below. Something of this notion of the world of the dead as a mirror image of the living is found in Western

Equatorial Africa--in notions that the ancestors live under the reflective surfaces of pools and watercourses in villages of the dead both the same as but different from the villages of the living. In my experience these quasi-enantiomorphic notions are not, however, as well worked out as in mezz-America. Still their presence may well account for the religious uses made of the mirrors in this part of Africa--the ease with which it is believed that a mirror can give us a view of the dead if not of the unseen land of the dead.

This widespread notion of being able to pass through the looking glass into other unseen realms--most relevantly here the land of the dead--is particularly abetted by the mirrors' second trick, the trick of locating the virtual image equidistant behind itself. This behind the looking glass effect has been long apparent to Europeans and emerges particularly in Lewis Carroll's books. It is also present in the production of Sartre's No Exit (1944) where stage directions prohibit any use of mirrors. The characters are not to be allowed even this possibility of escape beyond these their ultimate and immediate circumstances. There are plentiful instances in the ethnographic literature of local beliefs of being able to see deep into the world of the spirits through mirrors or of seeing one's spirit world soul in one's reflection.

Lust of the Eyes--Lust of the Mind

If the tricks of mirrors lend support to the notion that in them one can see beyond this world to the next world or the world of the imagination, at the same time mirrors do reflect the physical facts of this world. Indeed as parents of teenagers are painfully aware, mirrors tend to lend too much credence to the facts of this world--the facts of physical self. The possibilities for the gratification of concupiscent self-interest--the pleasures, not altogether unambiguous, of visual self-inspection--which are presented by mirrors lead to their banning in nunneries and other ascetic and self-abnegating institutions lest they exacerbate what St. Augustine called the "lust of the eyes."

On the other hand and paradoxically it is also believed often in the same culture that what a mirror reflects back is of the essence or the perfection of physical being. This belief is similar to the belief that what is actually seen in a mirror is the soul--the essence of being. Thus

Benedict in discussing the Japanese points out how they use mirrors to recapture the purity of the earliest "side of themselves" built up in childhood (1946:288-289)...a purity unhampered by the "observing self."

"That side which is built up in the earliest period is the "self without shame" and they test how far they have kept it when they look at their own faces in the mirror. The mirror they say "reflects eternal purity." It does not foster vanity nor reflect the "interfering self." It reflects the depth of the soul. A person should see there his "self without shame.".....Japanese feelings about the mirror are derived from the time before the "observing self" was inculcated in the child. They do not see the observing self in the looking glass. There their selves are spontaneously good as they were in childhood without the mentor of "shame."

One may, of course, be passionate about other things beside physical being purely or impurely regarded. Many a mind--and not only Platonic minds--is passionate to escape mere being itself. They lust after the perfections of abstraction, and mirrors, as devices by which essence or perfection can be perceived, can serve that purpose as well. This may explain why engines of evil such as vampires could not be seen in mirrors since they have no perfection. Another explanation is that such evils are actually disembodied presences. They are not really there in any physical sense and mirrors are bound to reflect the various fact. Or it may simply be believed that evil destroys itself in a mirror by being brought to recognize itself.

The notion that mirrors reflect the essence of things with the possibility of suggesting the perfection of things should be familiar to

anthropologists for we have from time to time conceived of our purpose to be that of holding a mirror up to man in which by seeing ourselves strangely (or darkly) in another culture we can discover the essence of our humanity if not the possibilities of its perfection. The more modern notion--which we shall consider below--is that the mirror we have been holding up first of all reflects ourselves the maker and manipulator of the mirror.

In any event the notion that the reflective process may be a process of the perfection of being is seen in the inclination to consider the perfect or near perfect beings of our existence as mirrors themselves. Most notably is the Virgin who has been considered as the "Specula sine macula" the mirror without blemish. In a believing Christendom it is to be much preferred that a picture of the Virgin or the Saviour should be found in young people's chambers rather than a real mirror. For in those pictures will be reflected all the essential virtues of Christendom such as a mere mirror could not reveal. In the same way extended contemplation of any picture of Abraham Lincoln, "maculas" and all, will cause in us reflections upon the essential virtues of our Republic...for they are to be found there in as near perfect a form as they are likely to be embodied in a Republic.

It is not only in the human face that we can see reflected the essence or the perfection of ourselves. Anyone who has worked among cattlekeepers of East Africa will recognize what a reflected sense of satisfaction is given by contemplating the family herds. Cows can be mirrors in many parts of the world. Here is a translation from the Spanish novelist, Concha Espina, and her story, *El Rabion* (1948:69) which takes place among cattle-keeping peoples of northern Spain.

The other cows docile in their accustomed route had just crossed over the river confidently without hesitation and Martin harrassing

them from the bank with shouts and whistles saw them walk slowly away towards the village. Then he ran in search of the saucy companion, the best one in the herd, in which the family saw themselves as in a mirror. (se miraba como en un espejo)

For the rest Evans Pritchard (1934) has shown for the DinRa (as for the Nuer) how many images are reflected back to them when men sit back to contemplate their herds...and how these images bouncing off of cows, as it were, complexly associate cattle to other beings in the animal world and both to the various relevant domains of human experience.

Self-Objectification and Back

In our discussion to this point we see the mirror employed both literally and figuratively. On the one hand by looking literally into mirrors we obtain a sense of ourselves as object--as something to be seen by others. This is the sense of the term self-objectification. On the other hand, in a more figurative sense, we see that objects can be mirrors reflecting us or aspects of ourselves. We might call this object-subjectification (with a high tolerance of cumbersomeness): the discovery of self by recognizing a convincing association with objects which reflect us... which we are well satisfied to let stand for us.

It has been made plentifully apparent in the writings of Jaques Lacan that in addressing ourselves to mirrors we are not simply exploring an interesting artifact with some wonderful properties. Rather we are addressing ourselves to an artifact which is central and crucial to the achievement of identity. It is probably primordial. Lacan (1949,1953) has spoken at length about the "joyful assumption of their specular image" by children and he points up as the necessary stage, "stade miroir" as he calls it in the precipitation of the "I" into that dialectic of identification between

the object and the subject. Before the subsequent taking from "the other" of language and the predicative process, an acquisition that restores to us our subjective existence, we must pass through the mirror stage of the alienated self--the stage of the "moi."

Lacan, moreover, actually examines, the narcissistic fascination of the young with their image--their attempts to control their own image in a mirror in the early phases of their growth. It is this primordial mirror play, as it is, which interests him as it interests us here. Indeed he makes reference to animal biology where experiments show that the proper maturing processes of animals demands a perceptual relationship to another of the same species. Where this is not possible the substitution of a mirror in the animal's cage can itself provide for the normal tempo of development. How interested Lacan might be, therefore, in recent experiments in psychology on subjective self-awareness by Robert Wicklund and others. These researchers force their subjects to fail or succeed in their experiments so as to induce discrepancies, positive or negative, between images of self and actual performance. Then they place these controlled groups in rooms with a mirror where they can't avoid inspecting themselves and which create, therefore, objective self-focusing. Those who have failed, and suffered in self-esteem, show a significantly reduced tolerance of the room itself (Duval and Wicklund 1972:16-20). Wicklund and his associates have engaged in a variety of mirror manipulation of the experimental kind practically all of which shows how much a mirror has to do with one's sense of identity, situation tolerance and self-rating. They have also shows that subjects who have just undergone "induced positive performance" show a significant increment in the number of first person pronouns they employ when speaking about the experience in the presence of a mirror when compared to a "no-mirror" situation. (Brock and Davis 1974.) Subjects are also given the opportunity (Wicklund

personal communication 1975) to cheat on a mock exam with important rewards. There is significantly less cheating in the presence of a mirror.

These are examples of a resourceful scientific objectivity in action-- that lust of the mind which is the dominant characteristic of our age. However we are to interpret the meaning of the mirror itself in these experiments, the self or other presence it brings to bear on the subjects (including the thought that they may always suspect a two-way mirror--that is no mirror at all--they suitably bring into focus the notion of alienation, distancing from self and from others which the mirror suggests. If all we learn from mirrors is their initial lesson, self-objectification, and if we forget their subsequent lesson, object-subjectification, then we are easily led into a rather arrogant objective paradigm--that alienation from the dialectic of reflexivity with which we are here struggling and which is an inevitable feature of the study of the other. The culture of science may demand Piagetian de-centering and self-(and other) objectification. But those of us interested in passage over to a deeper grasp of the fabulation of culture and the ongoing search for identity will recognize that it is a reflexive process--reciprocal in an inseparable way--the "mind reflecting upon itself" as Levi Strauss says of myth making, both his own and that of others, the subject seeing itself in the object, the object living itself in the subject. In short, it is the mind in the mirror.

Conclusion

"if an ape peeps in will an
apostle peer out?"

George Lichtenberg

These final difficult issues demand to be addressed in a variety of ways. We must look into many mirrors. Here we have been interested in mirrors themselves. The mirror, it appears, is par excellence the instrument of

paradox--the paradox we are exploring here. It presents a direct and recognizable image which is yet an inversion, a reversal. It presents something in itself which is yet behind itself. The paradoxes of reflectivity which are passively present in mirrors are actively present in the eye--that primordial mirror--of the beholder. From very early on in human experience we have had to contend with reflective surfaces. To the degree that we accept, like Merleau-Ponty (1962), the primacy of visual perception as the dominant mode of "making things intelligible"--to the degree that we accept that thinking is reflecting⁸--we see that we are inescapably confronted with that paradox: in looking upon another we see ourselves, in looking into ourselves we see another.

Beyond that the mirror is and always has been a crucial device of extension and linkage. Given the essential solitary quality of the human condition the mirror has been a device for escaping the fate of isolation. It is a device by which we can extend ourselves into the other while, at the same time, linking ourselves with that other. We know, in point of fact, precious little about others and although we live amidst a welter of impulses and habits, precious little about ourselves. The mirror shows us a fundamental truth about human affairs. The way that we discover ourselves is precisely the way we discover others and these discoveries are in reflexive relationship.

The mirror then is one of those devices, perhaps the fundamental one, by which we can gain some enthusiasm to base a sociable life plan upon. It can give us, as we see, some feeling that there is something of our fathers in ourselves and something of ourselves in them. It can give us some feeling that there is something of the king in everyman and something of everyman in the king. If the mirror can give us such feelings--and to return to our epigraph again--the "sensation of relief" may well be absolute.