

Hey Psycho!

English

The term *reflection* – derived from the Latin verb *reflectere* – for *bending back* – only took on its characteristic ambiguity in the late 17th century, when the meaning was extended from simply designating the reflection back of light waves. It now began to encompass the mental scrutiny of a conceptual object or even contemplation of an individual's own being. And even the physical mirroring of an individual's own countenance, which causes one to recognise one's own physiognomy as evidence of subjectivity alongside the physiognomy of other people, has not been in existence for very long. Only when the technology was invented in Murano – the island of glass production near Venice – for inserting a tin-mercury amalgam in glowing spheres blown from the innovative sparkling, colourless glass known as *cristallo* so that it coated the inner surface, was it possible to encounter one's own persona in a crystal-clear but reversed reflected appearance.

Prior to this invention, the reflection of light of the person who wished to judge themselves as a phenomenon was only reproduced in the rippled images provided by polished metal surfaces and the surface of water – vague, dark and certainly not reflected in true colours. Venice succeeded in keeping the hugely profitable production secret for around two long centuries and preserving its global monopoly on this technology. By no means fortuitously, the literary and intellectual awakening and self-awareness of an individuality that regarded itself as such came into being in that era when it unexpectedly became possible for the first time to bask in the radiance of a true representation of one's own features. The early autobiographies of the Renaissance period such as those produced by Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571) and Gerolamo Cardano (1501–1576) are among these self-awakenings. The famous self-portrait of himself in the convex mirror painted by the 21-year-old painter Parmigianino (1503–1540) in 1524 provides a direct expression of the change in paradigm of perception which only became possible with the invention of the glass mirror.

Altogether, the major role played by the mirror in the visual inventory constituting the iconography of the Renaissance provides a significant indication of the shock generated by confrontation with the reflection of an individual's own self. The historic awareness and the social praxis imbued in the role of a self-determined individual as an independent single will, which commits its assets and capabilities for their advancement, insinuate the dissemination of the mirror, and the construction of a self-aware individual familiar with its own likeness.

The appropriation of the secret of production from Venice brought about by the intrigues of the finance minister of Louis XIV in 1665 precipitated a widespread use of the looking glass that had initially been shrouded in an aura of magical mystery. This artefact had started life as an exceptional luxury bearing testimony to aristocratic authority and self-assurance, only to become an everyday utility item by the 19th century. And yet ideational realisation of the individual subject coincides with the invention of the mirror: manifest evidence of a self-consciousness.

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) dedicated his unique screenplay laconically entitled *Film* to abhorrence in the face of primaevial self-recognition in the mirror. Buster Keaton is the protagonist in the film but he is only seen from behind until the final sequence. The film watches him ripping up photographs on which he himself appears to be represented. In the end he gazes at his own mirror image as a profoundly shocking metaphor of mortality. It stares back at him paradoxically non-reversed, to which the conspicuously positioned black eye patch emphatically alludes.

Recognition of unreal lookalikes perceived as a reflection embodied in both senses of the ambiguity is encountered as a central feature in the conceptual oeuvre of Douglas Gordon and in the painting of Florian Süßmayr. Both artists refer to *self-portraits* when they present the unavoidably diffuse similarities on steel surfaces such as those developed by Süßmayr, or with photographs depicting facial-features erased by burnt holes and backed with mirror surfaces, produced by Gordon in his type of work named *Self Portrait of You + Me*. As indicated in the titles of these pieces, both of the artists recognise the reflection back onto the self that conflictingly gestures towards a generality. The image presented in reflecting surfaces is a universal, anonymous revenant because any subject can recognise itself indiscriminately in these experimental arrangements.

None other than something profoundly philosophic gains form here, since whoever looks into the mirror can only do this from the perspective of an insinuated judgement of the other self, if the viewer wishes to comprehend what they are seeing – namely a personal image of themselves. The viewer's own likeness only takes on meaning in relation to how one judges the others in facial features. Only the mirror is able to capture this: the implications of sociality, perhaps even the psychology of competition entangled in rivalry.

The third author who forms part of the magnificent visual interplay of the visual regime created by Gordon and Süßmayr – Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) – constructed his film *Psycho* (1960) within a framework of lucid logic as an escalation of mirror images. The morally justified identification template of *Marion Crane* encounters repeated reflections of herself perceived in omnipresent mirrors before she finally confronts the distorted double of her guilt – the murderer whose action is guided in the same way as hers by the inner voices of conscience. He is called *Norman* and consequently embodies *normality* in phonetic homophony. This hallucination of the ego embodied in the other is surrounded by many figures representing the mirror-inverted change in form, whether this is the stuffed cadaver of the mother embodied as a cuddly toy in the guise of an angry rabbit. Or the fly presented in the film script that interrupts the act of love in the sleazy hotel at the beginning of the film only to be reanimated as the fly at the end of the film that Norman, crazed and mentally ill, in the role of his mother cannot harm.

Since the work of Douglas Gordon and Florian Süßmayr encompasses some surprising points of contact, the joint exhibition holds out the promise of particularly revealing insights. The thematic field presenting the phenomenon of mirror images showcases that both artists only approach their perception of the world through the agency of mediatization. *Mimesis* or the imitation of perceived nature is inevitably already overcome as a deceptive immediacy. Süßmayr's paintings unflinchingly give the impression of observing the emergence of something photographic and this is why small two-dimensional representations of his pictures display the remarkable character of ambiguity. In the case of Gordon, the inherent laws of the medium are dissected in a sublime form of intuition akin to an autopsy of phenomena. The two iconic programs are therefore linked by the evident interest in cinematography. Gordon sees himself as a conceptual filmmaker using film techniques in a cinematographic tradition. Süßmayr worked for a long time as a cameraman, lighting technician and even as a projectionist in Munich's film museum before he turned to painting, where his output includes the concept of the *film still* even in the title.

The two *œuvres* also present overlaps in the focus on the violence of cultural gentrification impacting on the life of highly coded sign systems within the precarious zones of urban fabric and indeed putting them at risk. This sphere undoubtedly

also includes for both artists an obsession with the cipher of the soccer game. This perception has resulted in major works in the work of Douglas Gordon and Florian Süßmayr. The latter was successful as an amateur player, while Gordon's embodiment of the vernacular informed and inspired his productivity. Both protagonists spent their youth in the context of *Punk* as a countercultural political movement and presumably this is the basis for the proximity of the two authors to Hitchcock's unexpected judgement propounded at the end of his film *Psycho*. Namely, that the persona who finally stigmatises the mother's boy *Norman* – who is in thrall to his mother – with the diagnostic phrase *psycho*, is not a psychiatrist in a white coat. In fact, it is the policeman who appears confidently as the representative of the *power of the state*.

The confrontation with the inventive images of Gordon and Süßmayr is of great interest to the *Institute for Politics of Representation*, not simply because they touch its long-standing engagement with the origins of the mirror image in the technological prowess of Venice and its performative contribution to establishing the contemporary notion of self-consciousness. The main focus of interest is because this approach facilitates a greater vision within these pictorial configurations of what Ernst Mach called the *living habits of the sense of sight* in 1922.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and the American perceptual psychologist Joseph Jastrow (1863–1944) both took the *rabbit-duck illusion* so seriously – first published as a pictorial joke in a German popular magazine in 1892 – because the bi-stable pictorial illusion can allow the viewer to distance and objectify their own seeing. In it you watch yourself seeing how *It sees*: The alternative perceptions of the head of the duck compared with the head of the rabbit are mutually exclusive. You can only perceive one or the other, and not their simultaneity.

And this provides concrete proof for the concept embodied in the notion that you think what you see entails nothing more than that you simply recognise what you have already conceived. Seeing is not a sensory mechanism, certainly not a stimulus of a sensory organ, but a form of conceptualisation.

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