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Through, At, Into the Looking Glass:
An Argument for Mirrors as Media

“Almost no one can resist at least a glance into a mirror no matter how often and how recently he has inspected his own reflection” (Loevinger, 287). Penned by theorist and journalist Lee Loevinger, these words ought to ring true with any reader who has ever pondered the strange and familiar world of the mirror. This paper will take the position that mirrors can and should be viewed as a medium, and that accepting mirrors as such will critically challenge certain aspects of the ways in which we define the term media itself.

What do we bring to the experience of looking into a mirror? Are mirrors extensions of nature, or do they hold their own symbolic form? These are two of the immediate questions that arise from the claim that mirrors are media. Of course, there are more questions and criticisms: Do mirrors convert the world, transferring messages according to a ‘systematic distortion?’ Are mirrors simply tools, optical artifacts, or instruments, like microscopes or prisms? If a mirror can really communicate, who is the signifying, message-encoding agent? The biggest question is this one of agency, of the “image maker” or sender: If a mirror is a medium, does the message have a creator, if the mirror image is indeed a “true” reflection of nature? What is it to reflect nature? These criticisms and inquiries have prompted the arguments below, arguments designed to answer each of these questions in turn.

So why are mirrors media? The above criticisms will be addressed in turn with three arguments: The first will be the argument for framed experience, that mirrors by their nature

delineate boundaries that separate, rather than incorporate, themselves from the continuity of the natural world. The second will be an argument from semiotics, treating the reading and recognition of signs in mirrors in the same way that we treat signs in other varieties of media. Finally, an argument will be made for the unification of the “sender” and “receiver” positions in the classic definition of media by proposing an embodied closed-circuit system of communication in the beholder of the mirror image.

Defining media

Media, defined in the most basic way, are the intervening substrates for the processes of transferring information. Other definitions of media often treat media as specific midpoint stages between things in space or time. In his book on media analysis, Arthur Berger formulates a long list of the top reasons people use media (Berger, 108-115). These reasons include: to be amused; to see authority figures exalted and deflated; to experience the beautiful; to satisfy curiosity and be informed; to identify with the deity and the divine plan; to find distraction and diversion; to experience empathy; to experience, in a guilt-free situation, extreme emotions; to gain identity. Were we to swap out the title of this list with “Reasons why people look at mirrors,” we see that this list is a study on what it is to reflect on nature. The reasons why we use mirrors mimic the reasons why we use media. Mirrors may not show us authority figures, but the viewer’s image in the mirror is as foreign an entity as the figure in the image on the TV screen, in the sense that neither are readily visible without imaging techniques. As do all media, mirrors inform us, help us to get in touch with our identities, and in turn allow us to gain insight into the human

condition. All media “reflect” a natural world, in this way. This brings us to the first argument, that we use mirrors as media for a framed experience of different aspects of nature.

The argument for a framed perspective

Harry Jamieson, in his book *Visual Communication*, describes a world of frames within frames.

Imagine visiting an art gallery with the intent of experiencing a painting:

Art gallery > Foyer > Art period > Unique artist > Gallery wall > Framed picture

We move through the gallery, through multiple experiences and frames (Jamieson, 95). Some have been defined by outside intention, such as by putting the painting in a particular section classified by the artist’s name or style. Other experiences are framed by their mere physicality: The painting may be framed, but the framed painting is itself framed by its presence on the wall, and framed again by its relationship to the gallery’s foyer. Each successive frame is delineated by physical boundaries, and each boundary sets itself apart from the last. In a library, when searching for a book, one has to walk to the shelf, look for the the author, the title, and finally the volume itself before accessing the embedded information in the text. The book is not its surroundings, but it is intrinsically connected with them via its relationship to them. The painting is an artist’s reflection on the world, framed via its habitat in the gallery.

Something similar is true of mirrors. The assertion here is that the reflection in the mirror is set apart from the continuity of our spatial experience of the world. All media are extensions of nature, and all media have certain characteristics that clearly delineate them from the continuity of our experience of presence. Radio, for example, often provides a real-time aural vantage point

for a listener, by taking the auditory information from one location and broadcasting it. The sounds of the radio are framed by their detachment from the here and now. In radio, the moment is passed as soon as the listener hears it. Mirrors, too, provide an ordinarily unattainable vantage point as a reflective surface by providing visual information about a present place and time, framed by its existence as a reflective surface.

To a degree, all media rely on the concept of the frame in order for the requisite transferral of meaning to occur. Paul Virilio, writing on dromoscopy (the roles of speed and interface as important factors in perception), emphasizes the unique viewing conditions of the outside as framed by the windshield and dashboard of a vehicle. What we see through the windshield is indeed nature, but our perception of the world through the temporal frame of speed and the physical frame of the dashboard give us license to reinterpret our surroundings in a way unique to the particular frame. Since we perceive mirror images not to be nature itself per se, but reflections of nature, the experience of looking through a mirror is also framed by our own perception. On the primary stage of the optics of viewing, Jamieson notes:

“Whatever the source of information, whether it is unmediated/natural, or mediated/cultural, the visual processes for dealing with the input of light are identical... The source of the light may be direct, as for example from the sun, or from other artifactual means such as an electric light, or it may be reflected, bouncing from the objects or scenes which it illuminates... The process is one of transduction and encoding; thus mediation is under way at this very early stage and reality is therefore placed at a distance. Something begins to stand for something else.” (Jamieson, 15)

Jamieson takes an extreme step backwards, looking at our entire ocular mechanism as being, in a way, a medium between the world and our ability to derive meaning from it. Along with this assertion are the neurological powers of the brain and psychological expectations we bring to the

visual experience. So nature is not framed, and our perception naturally is. We experience time successively through our bodies, but we cannot experience ourselves visually. For that, we rely on mirrors.

When we look at a mirror, we bring expectations and uncertainty. Otherwise, there would be no need for us to peek at the mirror first thing in the morning. The act of looking in the mirror is a kind of self-validation, integral to the way we build our identities and carry ourselves in the world. In a Radiolab podcast entitled “Mirror Mirror,” we hear the story of a man whose life changed when he realized that, though he parted his hair on the left in the mirror, everybody saw him with his hair parted on the right (Abumrad, Krulwich). Aphoristically, physical traits like earring placement or a hair part tell a lot about a person: In depictions of the comic book hero, Clark Kent parts his hair on the right, while Superman parts it on the left, indicating a strong difference in identity shift. When we look through the frame at our reflection, it is not us in our natural state: we are reading and interpreting a reflection of ourselves, depicted by the optical conditions of the mirror as framed apparatus.

The argument from semiotics

In his textbook on practices of signification, cultural theorist Stuart Hall discusses three distinct approaches on how meaning is created through representation. Of particular note is the “reflective,” or mimetic approach, as opposed to the intentional approach (where our understanding of reality is created by representations) and the constructionist approach (where representations create, or construct, meaning, based on a material reality):

“In the reflective approach, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea, or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in

the world. As the poet Gertrude Stein once said, ‘A rose is a rose is a rose’... A two-dimensional visual image of a rose is a sign – it should not be confused with the real plant with thorns and blooms growing in the garden.’ (Hall, 24)

The reflection of a rose isn’t actually a rose, yet the mirror communicates that the rose is there.

How is this signification? Several theorists have dealt with hermeneutics and the process of perception and interpretation, including Kittler with the concept of the ‘bottleneck of the signifier.’ Others have considered form and meaning to be one in the same. If it is possible to read signs in nature where signs have not been authored or engineered, then signification in a mirror is simply interpretation of the world through the frame of reflection. The question of intentionality becomes important here. Arthur Berger touches on the role of intention by describing the relationship of the sound-image (signifier) and concept (signified) in cinema.

Consider the table below (Berger, 30):

Signifier (shot)	Definition	Signified (meaning)
close-up	face only	intimacy
medium shot	most of body	personal relationship
long shot	setting and characters	context, scope, public distance
full shot	full body of person	social relationship

It is up to the director to design cinematic shots to achieve certain effects. In other words, the director has the ability to make choices with regard to how we might receive information shaped through the systematic distortion of the cinematic apparatus. But lack of apparatus does not prevent us from reading signs in places where they haven’t been engineered. For example: Later, in “Checklist for semiotic analysis of television,” Berger encourages the viewer to “Isolate and

analyze the important signs in [a] text” by asking questions like “What are the important signifiers and what do they signify? What is the system that gives these signs meaning? What codes can be found? And what ideological and sociological matters are involved?” (Berger, 32).

Answers to these questions do not necessarily depend on an image maker. The answers to Berger’s questions may be infused in the world around us. Harry Jamieson, again:

“Broadly speaking, one could say that [the world] communicates its existence, or, to use a visual term, it makes an appearance. But here at the outset we should be careful to make a distinction between appearance, that which appears in the eye of the beholder as an image, and information which is the effect produced by the image at a mental level. These factors of appearance and information are not necessarily synonymous, although they often seem to be so, particularly in the field of visual communication where the image appearing on the retina may also be its meaning.” (Jamieson, 11)

In other words, this is a world where the message, and the systems that give the signs meaning, can be latent in an object’s mere existence. If we think back to looking at ourselves in the mirror for a moment: Nick Lacey writes on non-verbal communication, citing Michael Argyle in *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour* (1983), and notes that much of what we seek most often in media is the information that a person’s body holds, in facial expression, gaze, gestures and other bodily movements, bodily posture, bodily contact, spatial behavior, clothes and appearance (Lacey, 9). When we look at ourselves in a mirror, we read our image in real-time as signs. For example, our expression and posture reveal our mood. Our interpretation of events in the mirror as not being part of a true nature to be experienced, but rather as reflections to read and decipher, brings us one step closer to accepting the proposition that mirrors are a medium.

The argument for an Embodied Linear Communication System

Stuart Hall, in “Encoding/Decoding,” describes a linear system of signification (Hall, 128). In this system, the standards of communication via a medium rely on an agent in the “sender” position designing and encoding a message to be decoded by a recipient in the “receiver” position. The object is for a message to be communicated. It is tempting to challenge why communication is a requisite for the definition of media – however, as long as Ong and others insist that media allow for communications systems (physical, lexical, or other), along or via which messages can move between subjects and targets, it can be argued that mirrors provide the same opportunity for communication. It is necessary, however, to propose an Embodied Linear Communication System (ELCS), in which the viewer and receiver reside in the same individual.

It starts with the concept of presence. All vision is proximate, showing us our immediate surroundings, and the optical system allows us to target, focus, and engage our surroundings. In a way, there is no “frictionless” perception, as everything we see becomes subject to our own neural firings. Timothy Engström and Evan Selinger discuss a conception of communication that gets to the core of how vision itself is means for communication.

“... We seem to encounter two very enduring impulses, from Plato’s cave to Nazi propaganda to virtual reality projects: what can be brought to the eyes carries with it the implicit conviction that we’re having direct experience of the most reliable, confirming, and immediate sort; and that however mediated the experience turns out to be, critical knowledge of how these forms of mediation work tends not to trouble that practical conviction. Vision and presence seem intertwined, no matter what; and being continually reminded that the former doesn’t confirm the reality of the latter is of little practical import, so long as the seeing that is mediated is indeed of some practical and institutionally reinforced value: it assists us in the pursuit of some interest or other.” (Engström and Selinger, 25)

Representation, self image, and reflection: What we gain from the experience of looking into a mirror is the satisfaction of the affirmation or negation of our preconceptions about nature. Along an ELCS, we become both the sender and receiver of information. Harry Jamieson noted that “On inspection we may detect that in visual communication ‘in-forming’ takes places at three separate levels, (a) at the level of the sender/image maker, (b) at the level of the receiver/viewer, and (c) at the level of convention, both social and cultural” (Jamieson, 55). An ELCS allows us to look as mirrors as media, providing us with the opportunity to combine the image maker, the person in nature, with the receiver, who perceives the sender in nature, in a unified body. Another word from Engström and Selinger shows us that it may not be too far afield from present interpretations of Media Theory to attach importance to the concept of an ELCS:

“... Old ontological ambitions might be recontextualized and revived, even enhanced, as they’re transformed by new digital means of sight. We might find in the realm of digital/visual technology not more reason for Heideggerian anxiety but, rather, optimistic claims for a new “authenticity,” for “existing computing” and “existential technology,” as Steve Mann, Ray Kurzweil, and others claim. Once we see ourselves as tools all the way down, we may consider the redesign of the self in terms of what the newest (cyborgian) tools permit. We may hope, for example, to engage a society’s commitment to surveillance with our own “sousveillance”—the pleasurable appropriation and internalization of technologies of sight that permit us to look back, record, keep in check, and balance the systems that observe us.” (Engström and Selinger, 48)

If a mirror is any kind of media, it is indeed one that allows us to “look back, record, keep in check, and balance the systems that observe us.” An ELCS allows us to consider media as an ultimate ideal in communication, one in which so little is lost in translation but so much is gained in knowledge and self-imaging. Jamieson noted that “In ideal communication the received meaning of a message, and here we include an image as a message, would be identical to its

intended meaning” (Jamieson, 56). In this instance we could say that sender and receiver come to a perfect agreement of the intended meaning in the mirror image.

Between the argument for a framed perspective, the argument for semiotics, and the proposition of an Embodied Linear Communication System, mirrors can now be considered a medium in their own right because they are framed outside of the natural experiential continuum, because they provide the ability to transmit and interpret signs, and they can do it because they incorporate the requisite “sender” and “receiver” positions into a unified body.

Consequences of accepting mirrors as media

There are some important consequences of accepting mirrors as a medium. Foremost, the proposition challenges the “sender/message/receiver” linearity as described above by Stuart Hall (Hall, 128). Assuming again that communication is a requisite of the definition of media, that agency is a requirement for forming a message, and that something really does have to be encoded for it to be within a medium, consider Jamieson on the question of the image maker: “[The image maker’s task] is an intellectual activity, over and above the skills that it demands. Our interest centers upon the image maker as form maker and communicator, and the viewer as receiver, both of whom, in their separate ways, are engaged in making selections, of giving form or perceiving form within a restricted set of alternatives” (Jamieson, 50). At first this seems problematic, until we remember that in looking at a mirror, the image maker and the receiver are one in the same. The receiver is indeed engaged in making selections, perceiving the framed reflection of nature as a fulfillment of expectations prior to peering through the looking glass. To a degree, this recalls aspects of Actor-Network Theory, as resonated by Werner Rammert: “I

suggest abandoning the ontological duality of human action and technical means in favor of a multiple reality of distributed agency” (Rammert, 90). If we have the agency to communicate as nodes, perhaps mirrors provide a recursive loop for us as an ELCS to transmit and receive a single message, and in its reception, marking the differences semiologically.

Accepting mirrors as media also challenges Benjamin’s propositions on aura. Mirrors may in fact provide exciting insight to Benjamin’s work on aura in ‘the artwork essay.’ Aura is defined as that which is unique, singular, authentic, and distancing. Mirrors operate on all of those fronts: You cannot have a reflection without being conscious of its distance, and the reflection only exists in the immediate present, so it could be said that mirrors are highly auratic. However, a longer argument could be made against Benjamin through mirrors-as-media, because aura is also characterized by wonder, illusion, and lack of use value. Framed reflections are as realistic as an image can be, a nearly perfect, albeit flipped, reproduction of the fact, completely transparent in their reality and function. The mirror image surely must retain the auratic immediacy of the real thing within the rigid realism of the framed photo-realistic image.

A third front on which accepting mirrors as media challenges other forms of media is the idea of constituent delay and preservation. The mirror-as-medium concept provides a counter-example to the idea that media must have delay built into them, as mirrors can still provide communication and transfer information while being completely unable to exist outside of the present. Derrida, discussing *différance* as constituent delay in production and reception, makes a certain amount of sense even with radio, because while radio is nearly immediate in its transmission, it still goes through a rigorously systematic breakdown from sound into radio waves and back into sound. With regard to the imagery in a mirror, however, the concept of

constituent delay does not quite apply. The image in the eye of the beholder is neither Epimetheus nor Prometheus, but indeed a version of the beholder in the present.

Conclusion

Mirrors certainly cannot store information, they merely channel and transfer it. What faces a mirror image is its real-life counterpart, and the mirror image is a permanently changing one as long as the light bouncing against it is continuously reflected. It thus feels tempting to think that by simply manipulating and reflecting light, with no constituent delay or lack of archival ability, the reflections in mirrors are more readily understood as instruments or tools than as media. Yet mirrors aren't visual instruments. Mirrors, more often than not, are fora for interaction, externalized surfaces for communication, even if, in the case of an Embodied Linear Communication System, the communication exists between a singular individual. Indeed, there are widely accepted forms of media that don't necessarily involve preservation or archiving, such as streaming radio or television which bring the outside into the sphere of the viewer. In line with these forms of mass media, accepting the proposition that mirrors are media shows us that peering into the looking glass similarly brings an otherwise unattainable aspect of the immediate present into the sphere of the beholder.

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– Noah Fishman