

## Book forum

Maria Danae Koukouti, Lambros Malafouris, Shaun Gallagher, Carey Jewitt, Claudio Paolucci, Luigi Lobaccaro, Martina Bacaro

On Maria Danae Koukouti, Lambros Malafouris, *An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing*

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Maria Danae Koukouti (University of Oxford), Lambros Malafouris (University of Oxford)

### **Précis of the book**

Our book reflects on two main themes which are in dialogue: the nature of the mirrored self-image and the mirror as trap. Essentially, it provides a comparative anthropological enquiry of mirror gazing. We ask: what does it mean to look in the mirror? What is the agency of this object? What does it do to us? In our days, the mirror might not even be placed on the wall: it might be the mirror app on our smart phone, or the digital reflection within a mirror selfie. We are interested to explore how the mirror image affects human perception, our modes of attention and self-transformation.

But the mirror is simple, one might think, a self-explanatory device. So simple, in fact, that other species can use it (if they are offered the chance). And yet, as it is often the case with most mimetic creatures, natural or artificial, simplicity is misleading. Looking in the mirror and finding our self in the mirror are two different things. Mirror self-identification is an acquired skill, something you learn as a child growing up in a particular historical situation. This why it involves a great deal of unlearning. Take for instance our shared conviction that the mirror is a solid reflective surface – rather than a forward extension of space. This conviction demands and predisposes us to look “at” the mirror rather than “through” it. But

what would happen if we were instead to look “through” the mirror as if it was transparent?

Taking such a step requires a perspectival understanding of the world, which allows for ontological multiplicity. That is, the possibility that there is more than a single reality to see in the mirror, more than one world to navigate, more than a single story to tell. Do all people look in the mirror in the same way? How many ways are there? Tackling this ontological pluralism of looking in the mirror, we have tried in the book to set out a creative juxtaposition of stories of mirror gazing taking inspiration from Gregory Bateson’s thesis of connectedness (Bateson 1979: 14). We use metaphor, comparison and estrangement, to assemble and narrate stories of mirroring in a manner that respects and highlights their ontological proximity and multiplicity. Metaphor allows us to conceptualize the unfamiliar through the familiar. Comparison permits us to re-conceptualize two familiar things in the light of each other. Estrangement is used to turn the familiar into unfamiliar, and then to resituate the unfamiliar at the very heart of our ordinary habitual life.

We adopt an anthropological approach primarily because we want to disturb and estrange familiar habits of looking at our self-image (in the mirror, in a selfie, on our computer screen) so that new connections and patterns of juxtaposition may emerge: what we see is what we believe, but what do we see when we look in the mirror? As the developmental psychologist Philippe Rochat explains the “[m]irror reflection of the self is paradoxical in the sense that what is seen in the mirror is the self as another person” (Rochat 2001: 205). The mirroring is enchanting because, quite “un-naturally”, it allows the eye to perform a function deemed useless by natural selection, that is, to gaze at one’s own face.

We say that the mirroring is confusing because *it is an illusion that cannot lie*. On the one hand, what we see in the mirror is nothing but a phantom image of our body standing against the background of a solid shiny surface. But on the other hand, as the semiotician Umberto Eco observes, *[o]nce we have acknowledged that what we perceive is a mirror image, we always begin from the principle that the mirror “tells the truth”* (Eco 1984: 207). If you want to explore further this perceptual confusion we suggest you try a simple mirror gazing exercise originally proposed by the famous art-historian Ernst Gombrich (Gombrich 1960). Next time you will happen to look on the fogged-up mirror of your bathroom, circle the outline of your head with your finger. Then come closer and measure the length of the outline you have just produced. You will notice something strange: the length of the outline of your reflected head is actually half

the size of your real head. The reason for the misconception is simple: the mirror is always placed half way between us and our reflection. Yet it always seems to surprise us. Furthermore, we do not care: why should we bother about mirror-illusions?

We have learned to think of ourselves as agents, who have mastery and control over their mirror image. But as another art historian, Hans Belting, points out: we have never been “the masters of our images, but rather in a sense at their mercy” (Belting 2011: 9-10). How can this be? How can it be that a mirror image that leads the life of a shadow to exert any kind of control over us? To answer that question, we need to understand better the cognitive life of the mirror image (Malafouris, Renfrew 2010), that is, we need to understand what are the distinctive qualities of mirroring as a form of self-imaging.

So: what kind of image dwells inside the mirror?

Let us begin by noting that the mirror-image brings about a peculiar set of constraints for looking at and making sense of the world: first, a subject-object separation that reiterates a false dilemma between reality and appearance, and second, a sense of control of the subject over the object that reiterates an illusion of agency. A mirror cannot mirror anything before a subject is able and willing to identify its reflection in it. Yet, the subject gazing in the mirror and the object inside the mirror are one. This semiotic conflation blurs, if not cancels entirely, the distance between subject and object and creates a vacuum of agency that needs to be filled.

Mirroring signifies a natural occurrence. Specifically, the mirror offers a meeting place where two occurrences, that of our living body (the image referent) and that of our mirrored body (the mirror image), momentarily intertwine. This meeting between the mirror image and its referent is, unlike other signifying relations, based on synchronicity and co-presence. The referent (our body) must be present for the mirror image to occur. The self-contradictory character of the mirror image has always been something of a paradox. It's ambivalent ontology, *being* and at the same time *not-being*, has been the main source of its enchantment as a mode of representation.

It is the main trait of the mirror to make our body visible. Presenting us with the reflected image of ourselves, mirrors are turned into what the philosopher Michel Foucault describes as technologies of the self (Foucault 1987). By mirror gazing we become aware of how we look like to evaluative others. As social creatures we want our mirroring to conform to social expectations. In our times especially, we constantly share self-

images and mirror images (mirror selfies) on social media. That, along with the ongoing propaganda on how we should appear (eternally youthful, attractive, and fashionable) promoted by consumerism, might turn mirror gazing to an uncomfortable or even painful experience.

Should we, perhaps, avoid mirrors?

Banishing the mirror is not a solution. First of all, the mirroring in our days translates mostly to digital mirror-like reflections existing on objects we could never get rid of, like our smart phones or computer screens. Seeing our mirroring and coming to terms with our ever-changing image, is something we cannot escape. We can, nonetheless, choose to see things differently. In our book we invite you to think of the mirror as a trap. The mimetic exchange, assumes the relation between hunter and prey. So, we ask you to think of mirroring on a par with snaring and the mirror as a device for the remote capture of prey. How does the metaphor of the mirror as trap work? What creatures is it designed to catch? Who is the hunter and what is the prey? The argument we put forward is that mirrors are traps especially designed for sentient creatures of the self-conscious kind. In other words, the operation of the mirror trap is grounded on the ability of the mirror to act as a self-recognition device. We propose that the mirror resembles a powerful attractor within a semiotic field of subjectification. Specifically, the mirror trap operates primarily on the basis of mimesis, enchanting its prey by enacting a deep experiential “I see me”/“me but not me” paradox (Rochat, Zahavi 2011: 212).

From a functional point of view the making and setting of traps or snares is relatively simple. Yet, the idea of remote capture that those humble technologies embody is a complex one. Traps are more than smart hunting automata. The process of entrapment seen as a mode of enactive signification, between the hunter and the prey, can potentially expose relations of broader anthropological significance. A good trap, like a good hunter, is adapted to the distinctive features of its prey. Traps are also silent. Yet, they do signify, in the language of material signs, information about the animals’ strengths and weaknesses.

Like any other trap, the presence of the mirror signifies an absence that binds the allure of mirroring with the victim’s need. However, unlike other traps, the human animal falls in the mirror trap not in order to feed its stomach: it is not hunger for food but the human’s habitual quest for identity and self-knowledge that binds, aligns and entangles bodies and mirrors. The mirror is a trap we set for answers (who we are, what we look like). It works because it tricks us to think that we can acquire that

knowledge at a glance. Yet, what we recognize as “our self” in front of the mirror is an intangible image; a situational affordance of light and glass that mimics our movement.

We are not an image; nor are we made in the image of anything.

To explain the idea of the mirror as trap, we follow the Yukaghir hunters of Northern Siberia as they disguise themselves to mirror their prey, mimic its moves and become the animal’s mirror-image. The prey they are after is deer. Consequently, the deer – and in particular the gaze of the deer – becomes, in our book, a symbol for the human gaze and a connective sign between humans and animals in the common fate of victimization (Willerslev 2004).

Our modern capitalist society, as Susan Sontag remarks, feeds on images, “in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetise the injuries of class, race, and sex [...]. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself” (Sontag 2001: 178-9). The relationship between self and self-image can become greedy (as in the case of obsessive selfies), or burdened with social stereotypes. When that happens, mirror-gazing can end up consuming our sense of self instead of building it. Instead of symbiotic, our relationship with the mirror might become predatory.

On the other hand, the mirror can also be a healing tool, used for caring for the self and the other. The use of mirror therapy to treat phantom limb pain in amputees is offered as a good example of purposefully looking through rather than at the mirror, of turning a mirror illusion into a possibility of healing. The main point: our ways of seeing are not given or fixed. Seeing is an act of creation more than it is a mental re-presentation. Today’s lack of imaginative engagement, through and with the mirror, often renders it an uneventful and oppressive device. In our book we invite the reader to experiment with different ways of looking in the mirror and discover the one that will result in a personal, liberating narrative of the self.

A remaking of mirror gazing is part of a broader strategy for transforming our ecology of perception: our ways of seeing and of thinking inside the world. A new ecology of mirroring thus emerges, one in which our most deeply entrenched recollections, projections and anticipations can be challenged and where mimesis can be exchanged for critical self-consciousness.

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Shaun Gallagher (University of Memphis, University of Wollongong)

### **Recognition beyond the mirror**

In *An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing* (AG), Koukouti and Malafouris offer a rich analysis of mirror gazing which brings considerations about self together with considerations about others. They several times note that "by looking in the mirror we become immediately aware of how we look in relation with other people. What we see in the mirror is also what other people see when they look at us [...] the social eye becomes, in a way, our own" (AG: 140-1, 143). With respect to self-perception, however, this is not without the possibility of error. As one of Wittgenstein's (1958) examples suggests, I can look in the mirror and make a mistake, thinking, for example, that the sunburned

arm that I see in the mirror must be my own, when in fact it is my friend's arm. In this circumstance, when I say, "I am sunburned" I am wrong about who is sunburned. Wittgenstein explains that the use of the first-person pronoun in this case is *as object*, in contrast to when I use the first-person pronoun *as subject*, for example, when I say "I have a toothache", I cannot be wrong about who has the toothache. Mirror recognition is not immune to error through misidentification (IEM). Although it is not the usual case, I can mistake another for myself, or myself for another.

Yet in other cases the mirror may help correct our error. Koukouti and Malafouris mention this in terms of mirror therapy citing some of the work by Aikaterina Fotopoulou and colleagues (Fotopoulou *et al.* 2009). There are pathological cases of somatoparaphrenia following stroke, in which the patient is unable to correctly identify her own arm, and instead attributes it to someone else. Fotopoulou *et al.* show, however, that when the patient looks at her arm in the mirror, thereby taking a third-person ("as object") perspective on her body, she correctly identifies the arm as her own<sup>1</sup>. The dissociation in somatoparaphrenia, however, is not permanently corrected through the use of mirrors. The researchers suggest that proper functioning of specific areas of the brain (perisylvian areas of the right hemisphere) may be necessary for an integration of first- and third-person perspectives. In somatoparaphrenia the third-person perspective dominates in both the mirror and the delusion – that is, in both instances the patient takes views her body "as object", in Wittgenstein's sense. One possible conclusion is that in the case of self-recognition, in non-pathological cases, first-person (or the egocentric) perspective is primary, or as Fotopoulou *et al.* put it, "dominates".

It is likely that things are more complex. Somatoparaphrenia involves a "dissociation between the 'subjectively felt' and 'objectively seen' body" (Fotopoulou *et al.* 2009: 2946). If we associate the first-person subjective feeling of one's body with proprioception, and the third-person objectively seen body with one's visual perception of the body, the objectively seen body (in the mirror) dominates perhaps in part due to the absence or disruption of proprioception in patients with somatoparaphrenia. In non-pathological cases, when both proprioception and vision are intact, proprioception and vision can be put into conflict, for example, in the standard Star of David experiment (tracing the lines of the star seen

<sup>1</sup> This is not a case of reversing IEM since IEM is not at issue in such cases. See Gallagher (2015).

in the mirror). Turning the corners is very difficult due to the conflict between proprioception and the mirrored vision. In this case, we have intact neural processing of the normal sort, but the disruption originates in the environment; the mirror disrupts the accomplishment of a relatively easy task, and the body, which is both subjectively felt and objectively seen, is subject to proprioceptive-visual conflict. In the case of deafferentation due to peripheral nerve damage, however, subjects who lack proprioception can easily perform the Star of David test, turning the corners with ease, precisely because they lack proprioception and there is no conflict with vision, mirrored or non-mirrored (Gallagher, Cole 1995). Accordingly, interventions made in brain, or body, or environment can lead to dissociations between first- and third-person perspectives.

Rather than thinking of the first-person, egocentric perspective as primary, or dominant, then, perhaps we should consider the integration of first- and third-person perspectives primary, and likewise, the integration of visual, proprioceptive, and other senses, or more generally neural, bodily, and environmental factors. Consider that some experiments that manipulate the body and the environment lead to the dominance of vision over proprioception. This is well-known, for example, in the rubber hand illusion where the subject experiences a tactile stimulation, administered to his real hidden hand, in the visible rubber hand and starts to experience the rubber hand as part of his body<sup>2</sup>. The normal integration of vision, proprioception and tactile sense is disrupted. Likewise, in the Alien Hand Illusion (AHI), the visual of what is supposedly my hand in the act of misdrawing a straight line from A to B, but is actually the experimenter's hand that I see in a mirror, dominates the kinaesthetic sense of what my hand is actually doing (Fig. 1)<sup>3</sup>. I can know all the details of the experiment, and that I am actually seeing the hand of the experimenter in a mirror, and so know full well that the hand I see is not my hand, and that the movement is not my movement; but the effect (which is a weird

<sup>2</sup> In the RHI, a repetitive tactile stimulation is synchronously applied to the subject's hidden hand and a fake rubber hand that is positioned in view on a table directly in front of the subject. This typically induces an illusory sensation such that the tactile stimulation is felt on the rubber hand, producing a sense of ownership for the rubber hand (Botvinik, Cohen 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The Alien Hand Illusion is based on an experiment by Nielsen (1963). It involves a mirror illusion in which subjects believe they see their own gloved hand, when in fact they are looking at the experimenter's gloved hand (the "alien" hand) in a mirror (M2 in Fig. 1). Subjects are asked to draw a straight line from point A to point B. What they see is the experimenter's hand drawing off course (see Gallagher, Sørensen 2006 for more details).



feeling that my hand is doing something other than I want it to) persists (Gallagher, Sørensen 2006).

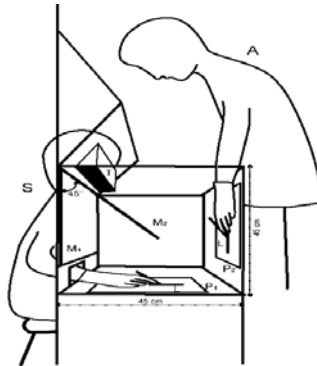


Fig. 1: The Alien Hand Illusion (from Gallagher, Sørensen 2006)

In both of these experiments the effects are achieved by manipulating the environment, and, in some sense, constraining the body<sup>4</sup>.

More generally I want to argue that, outside of pathological cases and experimental situations, integration, rather than the primacy of some one factor, tends to be the rule – cross-modal integration of the senses, an integration of first- and third-person perspectives, and an integration of brain-body-environment. Let me return with this principle to the question of what Koukouti and Malafouris call “the social eye”. This would start a much more detailed discussion that would lead us to larger issues pertaining to concepts of social interaction, recognition, and ultimately to questions that involve ethics and politics (see Gallagher 2020). Here, to

<sup>4</sup> Although some theorists narrowly frame the explanation of such experimentally induced illusions in terms of brain processes (e.g., Hohwy’s [2013] predictive processing account) they also, and usually obliquely, point to environmental and bodily factors as an important part of the explanation. Thus, for example, in the RHI experiment there is a need to restrain the subject’s “overwhelming urge to move their hands, remove the goggles, or otherwise intervene on the process” (Hohwy 2013: 126). The non-ecological, experimental set-up is part of the “circumstances” that lead to the illusion (Hohwy 2013: 127). See Gallagher, Hutto, Hipolito 2021 for discussion.

move us in this direction, I'll briefly reflect on just two issues that pertain to mirrors.

The first goes back to Aristotle. This is not the “curious” example that Koukouti and Malafouris point to concerning the mirror and the female body (AG: 90), although there may be some obscure connection to it in the fact that for Aristotle, friendship, or more precisely, perfect friendship, seems to be something that exists only between men. On Aristotle’s account, the best kind of friendship is one in which a man (sic) “is related to his friend as to himself (for his friend is another self)” (*Artis. Eth. Nic.* 9, 4). This has been called the mirror concept of friendship – when I look at my friend, I see another me; my friend reflects my own feelings and values, he offers something like an epistemic tool I can use to evaluate my own life; “friends hold a mirror up to each other” (Pigliucci 2012, but see Biss 2011 for an alternative interpretation). To be sure, for Aristotle, there are all kinds of lesser friendships; but only in perfect friendship do we find our mirror image: “as the virtuous man is to himself, he is to his friend also (for his friend is another self)” (*Artis. Eth. Nic.* 9, 9). In this regard, it can be said that Aristotle fails to recognize the value of diversity. There is no perfect friendship between man and woman, or between man and slave. Rather, Aristotle cites a set of proverbs where friends are “a single soul”, and “what friends have is common property”, and “friendship is equality”. In this respect, a mirror type friendship may subvert genuine recognition.

To see this more clearly, consider an early 20<sup>th</sup> century debate about the nature of empathy (*Einfühlung*). Theodore Lipps (1909) had developed a theory of empathy involving what today we would call a simulation framed in terms of one’s own feelings and experiences, projected onto the experience of the other person. Edith Stein offered a phenomenological critique of this theory, reminding us that a projection of our own self onto the other will never allow us to experience the other as such. She asks how a projection of “I” can ever give us an experience of the otherness of the other. In this regard, if the only thing I see in the other person is myself, I never enter into a genuine recognition of the other person. Remy Debes (2015) notes some implications of this view: “Because simulation cannot yield any understanding of others as distinctly other”, a simulationist account will always “fall short of what is needed to satisfy the demands of human dignity” (Debes 2015: 317).

The principle of integration would, in this context, acknowledge the diversity of social factors and cultural practices that mesh together to make each of us somewhat different from one another, and motivate an

account of ethico-political life that recognizes and respects such differences.

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Carey Jewitt (University College London)

***On An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing***

The main argument of the book is that looking at one's face in the mirror and finding one's self in the mirror centre on two distinct interrelated processes, with significant psychological consequences. Koukouti and Malafouris argue that while being able to identify one's face in the mirror is, or at least over time becomes, a relatively straight forward act, knowing how to "find one's self in the mirror" is a complex challenge that requires "effort and care". To explore what we can we learn about the self "through the looking glass", the book takes a critical comparative philosophical anthropological stance toward mirror gazing, and hones in on works drawn from ethnography, philosophy and storytelling to make its argument. Throughout the book the mirror is understood as "an active participant in our daily routines of self-identification", and shows the ways that we are in dialogue with it toward the construction of personal narratives and the idea of the self.

Koukouti and Malafouris takes the reader on a reflective journey through the Amazonia, Papua New Guinea, Mongolia, Siberia to Sudan guided by Berger, Butler, Deleuze, Derrida, Eco, Foucault, Freud, Gibson, Gombrich and Merleau-Ponty to name a few. It interrogates the relationships that we have with "our mirrored-self and how this compares with other forms of self-imaging" (chapters 1 and 2). It implodes the idea that mirrors "simply hang on the wall", and engages with the hand-held "dark side" of mirror gazing as a diminishing, punitive process of commodified distortion (chapter 3). Representations of staring into the looking glass in literature, art and popular culture are explored (chapters 4 and 5), and the place of the mirror as dangerous and hidden in magic and spiritualism are explored (chapter 6). Against this rich backdrop the art or skill of mirror self-identification is examined (chapter 7), where the reader is asked "to think of the mirror as a hunting weapon [...] a trap [...] especially effective with creatures of the self-conscious kind". Finally, the book turns to the therapeutic effect of mirror gazing and its healing effect (chapter 8). Hopefully this sketch of the ground covered and the questions asked by this book helps to capture the rather esoteric and imaginative ground covered by this book and signalled by its title. The book is full of phrases that helped me think newly or made me smile in recognition: "The image thief", "to look in the mirror is to ask for a story", "the mirroring of disgust", "the mirror trap". The table of contents is itself poetic and provoking.

I came to *An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing* (AG) with a scholarly interest and some personal baggage. I expect, and am strangely comforted by the idea, that most (if not all) of the book's readers will travel these dual paths across its pages. Indeed, one of the book's purposes is to guide the reader through the "art and philosophy of mirror gazing", offering stories as well as mini-exercises to explore what we can we learn about *our self* "through the looking glass". While maintaining an academic positionality, the book offers an unusual intimacy on mirror gazing. In so doing, it shows the affective power an interdisciplinary stance toward a phenomenon, that draws on ethnography, philosophy and storytelling to make an argument and achieves its goal "to turn the mirror into a creative apparatus of experimentation and of self-transformation" (AG: 149).

One of the powers of *Anthropology*, along with sociology and differently so the arts, is to train its lens on the "mundane" to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" to move beyond everyday common-sense reasoning in order to gain in depth understanding of phenomena. This book takes "mirror gazing" – an everyday practice with a mundane object, as the authors write in the introduction: "We take it that most readers know what is like to look in the mirror and assume that, under normal conditions, are able to recognize one's own image in it" (AG: 3). Gazing at the mirror through an anthropological eye, however, the book re-situates the mirror in a range of cultural practices and material objects, and in doing so it looks beyond its glassy surface to show the many ways that the simplicity of this small object is misleading and how "Mirrors do more than mirroring" (AG: 4). The mirror is reimagined as hunter, trickster, phantom, unsettling trap, the "eye of the other", a spy, memory holder, a projection of the unconscious, full of desire and fear, a portal or shield: a powerful boundary object of everyday magic and science used to narrate, wound, judge, oppress or heal.

The book itself offers the reader a "period of habituation" to learn about the properties and workings of mirroring and its qualities as a "form of self-imaging" (AG: 18) with the warning that mirrors are neither innocent or to be trusted. Like the imagined deer in the forest conjured up in the book's prolegomenon, we are all "caught up in a game of mimesis, of presences and absences, of living bodies and lifeless reflections". However, chapter 8 on "How to look in the mirror" offers a route of escape towards a new way of looking and a world beyond. Powerful on a scholarly level as well as a personal one, for it offers the reader metaphors and lenses to explore other practices and objects. The book engages with

questions of body image, body dysmorphia, digital filters in sophisticated and nuanced ways to explore the technologies used (e.g., magnification) in the evaluation of the self.

For me, scholar and woman, reading this book became an exhilarating act of resistance. Through the mirror's "gaze of the holy inquisition", the book argues that mirror gazing can undermine self-identity, producing a "state in which the body is in opposition to the self" in which the young "true" self is understood as "hidden" beneath old skin (AG: 33).

However, rather than suggesting we avoid or destroy the mirror, the book argues that mirroring is central to our being in the world as it "forces us to repeatedly come to terms with who we are" (AG: 39). It encourages the reader to engage with the realities of their reflection, to look "through the looking glass" to our skin as personal narratives through which we can trace the infinite riches of our lived experience. It invites us to "find a scar or a mark on our mirrored body and start a conversation with it [...] dig out emotions and images [...] (memories)" (AG: 45). I did wonder what does the books concern with the centrality of mirroring for self-identity mean for those who are visually impaired? Might the felt skin offer us all an alternative route through the looking glass? While the multisensorial character of mirror gazing is never far away in the discussion, I would have liked to understand better some of the tactile aspects of mirror gazing – looking in order to touch (clean, put on lotions or make-up, explore "flaws").

*An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing* is a poetic invitation to explore how mirrors change the way we see. Through "mirror stories" from science, anthropology, and literature – Narcissus to Shamanic mirrors, it disturbs and estranges us from our familiar relationship to this enchanting object. This exploration of the mirror rethinks the question of selfhood, asks *what is to find a self in the mirror*, to present mirror-gazing as a process of self-becoming. Before reading this book, I had two mirrors in my house – one in the bathroom and one on a spice-cabinet in the kitchen, both of which I try to ignore and use in functional ways (e.g., to floss). After reading this book I realised that I am actually surrounded by mirrors – the ever-present mobile phone in my pocket or hand, the reflective windows of my house, on the bus or the shop-windows I pass and catch an often unexpected sometimes blurry glimpse, sometimes too-harsh neon-echo, of myself. For the past 18 months or so, perhaps the worst mirror of all has been the stare of the zoom camera of my computer where I have self-consciously stared back and performed myself – to myself and others. Like many women, I have

a complex relationship with the mirror. I see my mother in the mirror – I see myself as my mother. I want the mirror to love me but I generally find self-critique rather than the reassurance I seek. This book reflected back the sociality of this experience, placed it in a broader cultural space, made me understand the “trap” of “self-hunting” I had fallen into and the holy inquisition I had embraced, and the potential to look differently. It asks us to look in the mirror and wonder what we see, through this process it challenges and repositions notions of beauty arguing that the saleable beautiful timeless face is an illusion “deprived of memory and thus of humanity” (AG: 149). It offers a way to “look through” rather than at the mirror and makes a strong case for the need for all of us to learn the skill of mirror gazing.

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Claudio Paolucci, Luigi Lobaccaro, Martina Bacaro (Università degli Studi di Bologna)

#### ***Ridentem dicere verum: quid veta? A semiotic perspective on An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing***

So what is in the mirror?

In order to solve this puzzling problem in philosophy, in *An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing* (AG), Koukouti and Malafouris’ strategy is to ground their reflections on an anthropological analysis of the different ways in which different cultures turn their gaze to and through mirrors. Thanks to the authors, we discover that the way we use mirrors every day for self-inspection is just one of the possibilities that the mirror image offers to our gaze. For the authors, looking at the mirror is a *process*, a *doing*, that can take very different forms depending on how this “magical” instrument *influences* and *affects our experience, perception, thoughts* and *knowledge*. The book’s central thesis is that mirrors are not objects that we can simply watch and judge, but they are things that enact our thinking (an operation that Malafouris used to call *thinging* in his previous works). Mirrors can shape our imagination by

bringing forth various possible worlds and can persuade us to live in these worlds by considering them true. In sum, mirror-gazing represents a visual mode of material engagement<sup>5</sup> (Malafouris 2013).

In their exhaustive dissertation, one of Koukouti and Malafouris' main references is Umberto Eco's reflection about mirrors and mirror images. Indeed, Eco's argumentations perfectly fit the Material Engagement Theory (MET), considering that, for Eco, mirrors: i) have a prosthetic status that allows the individual to do pragmatic and epistemic actions; ii) have to be considered for their catoptric rules, inherent to their material structure; iii) trigger the imagination enabling semiotic interpretations.

The link the authors propose between Echiian semiotics and MET on mirror gaze is groundbreaking for at least two different reasons.

The first is that it could help to advance a long – and still unresolved – debate on the semiotic status of the mirror-image that has been going on since the Seventies. In this quarrel, on the one hand, there is the position that proposes not to consider mirror images as “semiotic”, because they do not show the necessary characteristics definitive of the sign function. In this view, which has Eco as the main advocate, the mirror is a pre-semiotic phenomenon. On the other hand, there is a position that argues that mirror images are signs by substituting the classical notion of the sign with a phenomenologically oriented one (Sonesson 2003, 2015).

Malafouris and Koukouti can help semioticians to overcome this oppositional dyad by accounting for the status of the mirror image as a semiotic threshold phenomenon with the category of *material enactive sign*, namely a sign that does not stand for its object or concept, but that “brings forth the concept as a concrete exemplar and a substantiating instance” (Malafouris 2013: 97). Mirrors are not signs, but they play a part in the engagement that creates meaning and signification, co-producing them. This is why recently Dondero (2020) could talk of a “material turn” in semiotics, that moves towards the process of sign production and thinks semiosis as an external relational phenomenon in which the world plays an active role, which is constitutive of cognitive processes: an idea that is deeply intertwined with Peircean semiotics and its development in Cognitive Semiotics (Paolucci 2011, 2012, Iliopoulos 2019)<sup>6</sup>. This leads us

<sup>5</sup> Material Engagement Theory (MET) is based on the hypothesis that the human mind and the materiality of objects are intimately connected (Malafouris 2013). Material artifacts are epistemic tools with which we engage in pragmatic and epistemic actions, structuring the world we are situated in and where we act.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview, see Fusaroli, Paolucci 2011, Lobaccaro, forthcoming.



to the second point of convergence between the book and the semiotic theory.

Indeed, the agentive role attributed to the mirror in bringing forth signification and modifying cognition fits perfectly well the most recent semiotic theories on cognition and enunciation (Paolucci 2020, 2021, chapter 2): the mirror is a kind of agent that provides us a privileged point of view on ourselves and is a form of projection of the self. This image duplication contributes to creating stories in which whoever stands in front of the mirror is projected as an objectified self.

One of the authors of this paper has claimed that the ability to set up narrative structures and to take our own place inside of them as a “third person” – projecting oneself into possible worlds that define strategies that can be used to lie – is the semiotic structure that grounds subjectivity through enunciation (see Paolucci 2020 and 2021, chapter 2). Subjectivity is the capacity of an “I” to think at him/herself as an “he/she”, a character among other characters. Subjectivity is indeed the co-presence of different instances, an “assemblage”, like the old assemblies in the Seventies, where different heterogeneous voices were gathered together, with equal dignity and rights. As we will see in the discussion about inverting the right with the left, mirrors show us this irresistible power of perceiving ourselves as an other and they contribute to build it, as developmental psychology has shown. We claim that the ideas Malafouris and Koukouti expose in *An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing* seem to confirm this notion of subjectivity constructed through acts that have the form of a concatenation between heterogeneous instances (Paolucci 2020: 27), attributing to the mirror the role of an instance of enunciation, a fully-fledged active actor in the construction of an impersonal form of subjectivity. This role is perfectly shown in the book throughout the whole anthropological analysis of mirror-gazing: the literature on mirrors, from Carroll to Plath, Harry Potter, Giovanni Caputo’s experiments, Humphrey’s analyses on shamanic *toili*, and the considerations on the use of the mirror in the beauty industry. All this work seems to go in this direction, highlighting the indispensability of the mirror’s active role in creating collective imaginary and individual narratives.

What the mirror transparently seems to confirm every day – our ability to recognize ourselves as individuals with a specific aspect – is only one of the possible imaginative consequences that the mirror proposes to us, operating as a real technology of the self, a *prosthesis of subjectivity* (Paolucci 2017, 2020, chapter 6). It is through practice that the mirror can enact the capability to identify ourselves with the reflected image, so it

works like a third “impersonal person”<sup>7</sup>, non-human actant able to shape our self. As the authors argue, the mirror is a trap for animals in search of their self-consciousness: it “resembles a powerful attractor within a dynamic semiotic field of subjectification and self-identification” (AG: 104).

In this perspective, what we believe to be our bodily image is more deeply an enacted meaning that entraps us, making us prey for the sign that our material coupling with the mirror has produced. And to the topic of the mirror as a trap are dedicated some of the most beautiful pages of the book. This is why the mirror affords meanings, images and self-consciousness that did not exist before the enactment of the material sign. The mirror provides the possibility of creating a semiotic concept of the self as the co-presence of the “I” and of the “he”, and it does it through an ongoing process of interactions in which it actively becomes part of the cognitive development of those who look at it. So, one important part of our self-consciousness depends on the catoptric rules of an external tool capable of giving us a “face”, a tool that extends our mind and shapes our own self. “When grown up, we are the way we are just because we are (also) catoptric animals and have developed a double ability to look at ourselves (insofar as it is possible) and others in our and their perspective reality and catoptric virtuality” (Eco 1986: 207).

Given this important series of convergences between *An anthropological guide to the art and philosophy of mirror gazing* and contemporary interpretative semiotics and cognitive semiotics, we want to raise two orders of questions.

In the book, the two authors give great importance to the visual dimension of the material engagement with the mirror. This is quite natural since the mirror is primarily an instrument that reflects light on its surface. However, as Paolo Fabbri (2002) already noticed, other qualities of mirrors are equally significant.

Mirrors are also hard, smooth, sharp, opaque, have different shapes and sizes, and can be hanged or placed on the floor. The way in which these other physical characteristics shape the mirror-gazing appear to us just mentioned in the book and perhaps explicitly relevant only in the argumentations about the shamanic *Toli* mirror (AG: 79-98), where *toli*'s two different surfaces (the polished and the dull one), its location and its

<sup>7</sup> In almost every language the third person is both the form of the “person” (“he walks”, “il se promene” and so forth) and the form of the “impersonal” (“it rains”, “il pleut” and so forth).

round shape, are fundamental characteristics to manifest its function of portal, weapon and shield.

In our opinion, these characteristics, in addition to the visual ones, are equally fundamental in the material engagement with the mirror. For example, the solidity of the reflective surfaces can allow us to orient ourselves (often not without physical pain) in a house of mirrors and would have been helpful for Narcissus and Alice to stop their fall into the looking-glass. It is not by chance that, in order to move from a phase in which their mirror image is confused with another person to a phase in which they recognize their own reflections, children need to explore the reflective surface by kissing, hitting and touching it (Zazzo 1993). It is also through the material engagement with the mirror that subjectivity emerges (see Lobaccaro, Bacaro 2021), but this engagement goes far beyond just gazing, and we would ask the authors to go deeper into the role of the mirror's other material features in shaping the mirror-gazing.

A second issue we would like the authors to consider concerns their reading of the Echiian theory of mirrors. They agree with most of Eco's assumptions, except that mirrors always tell the truth. Indeed, they argue that the truthfulness about mirror images is related to a cultural prejudice that enshrines mirrors only within Western conception and practices of usage: the mirror never tells the truth about the world; we are always *fooled by the mirror* (AG: 6-7).

This point is ambiguous, and even if it is not so relevant for an anthropological line of argumentation, it is certainly crucial for the semiotic debate on mirror images. Is the mirror that does not tell the truth, or are we fooled by a mirror that still always tells the truth? We can be fooled by truth and, like in *The name of the rose*, we know that it is exactly in the name of the truth that people are usually misled. Eco simply tells us that mirrors offer a duplication of reality, and that they do this without any kind of interpretation or "Thirdness". This is why they "tell the truth". It is us that interpret what it is inside mirrors and get things wrong, not mirrors, that simply duplicate reality. So we make interpretations and we can be fooled by mirrors in the very same way we can be fooled by reality. But mirrors do not make any kind of interpretations of reality: they simply duplicate it. This is why they tell the truth. This is very clear in the common-sense idea that mirrors invert the right and the left: mirrors do *not* invert the right with the left *at all*. What is in the right still remains at the right in the mirror and what is in the left still remains at the left in the mirror. It is us that stop seeing from the perspective of our own body (ourselves as a "first person") and put ourselves into the shoes of the man

in the mirror (ourselves as a “third person”). If we don’t do that, we easily see that what is at our right still remains at our right in the mirror image too. It is only for the image in the mirror that what is at our left is at his/her right. So mirrors afford fooling exactly like reality does, but this does not mean that they do not tell the truth, exactly like a door affords its opening without implying that it opens by itself.

In our opinion, Eco would have accepted all the remarks made by Koukouti and Malafouris: indeed, also for Eco, distorting mirrors, Fata Morganas and catoptric theatres fool us, but *they do it in a non-semiotic way* (Eco 1986: 217-21). Eco’s assumption about truthfulness is related neither to Western common sense, nor to truth-conditional logic or ontology, but to a technical semiotic framework. In this sense, Dreyfus example of the dimension of the mirror image that is made by the authors is not so different from Eco’s argumentation, when he explains that mirrors do not invert the right and left, but only cause the impression of doing so because they do something to us while we use them. In this sense, we think that cognitive semiotics radicalizes even more the enactive nature of the sign: claiming that mirrors do not tell the truth because they fool us means to activate a residual kind of “representative framework”. On the contrary, mirrors tell the truth, but through duplicating reality they do something to us and they fool us through the truth. This is why people are still convinced that mirrors invert the right and the left. Eco does not deny that mirrors can distort reality, so much so that he speaks about mirror perceptive illusions, but he also says that when we interpret the mirror image, we are interpreting a kind of catoptric reflection that, as much as it is distorted, is nevertheless causally related to its object. In Eco’s argument, the truth has a semiotic sense, not an ontological one: we can lie about or through mirrors, but it does not mean that mirrors are liars on their own. Mirror images cannot lie because they simply build an isomorphism with their object. Who can lie are the interpretants activated about what the mirror reflects: the magic of mirrors resides here.

Paraphrasing the Latin poet Horace in his *Sermones*, we have to wonder: *ridentem dicere verum: quid vetat?* (Hor. l, 1, 24), that is, what forbids who mocks us from telling the truth?

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## Maria Danae Koukouti and Lambros Malafouris

### Response

We begin by expressing our appreciation for receiving such intelligent and thought-provoking comments. It is not very often that such opportunities arise and we heartily welcome the chance for this discussion.

We respond to criticism, to the best of our ability, but also pay close attention to the things that we agree on – those lines of thought that, though in agreement with ours, are coming from or heading towards different directions, opening up new windows of opportunity: an argument can be enriched by following the various, sometimes even contradictory, paths of accord and by not failing to harvest the diverse and new fruits of like-mindedness.

Carey Jewitt, touched on a very important and timely phenomenon referring to Covid 19 and the dramatic changes it has brought into our lives: “For the past 18 months or so, perhaps the worst mirror of all has been the stare of the zoom camera of my computer where I have self-consciously stared back and performed myself – to myself and others”. So, let’s take a closer look at the unexpected way mirror gazing came to be related to a pandemic. First, the obvious: confined into our houses, due to lockdown restrictions, we had time and opportunities to linger in front of the mirror more.

Indeed, never before our daily confrontation with our mirror image occupied a bigger part of our universe – our belittled pandemic universe. Of course, to look in the mirror is a very old story: to be perplexed, embarrassed or judgmental in front of it is to be human. What is relatively new, is the realisation, as Jewitt also confesses, that we are “actually surrounded by mirrors [...]”, that the mirror is not just placed on the wall: our faces are more than ever visible, watched and circulated through the mirror app on our smartphone, the inverted camera of the mirror selfie, the webcam.

This is an important observation. Screens, of course, were already parts of our lives long before the pandemic. We interact with them every day, as screens also interact with each other (the smartphone, the tablet, the computer) actively forming our screen ecology (Miller *et al.* 2021) and reshaping our social relations. Still, the work-from-home guideline, limited drastically in-person interaction, leaving us with nothing but screens.

Even after two years from the onset of the pandemic, online meetings of all kinds and purposes are taking place on our computer screens, where we have a live view of all participants, including ourselves. What started

as an enforced technology, is now acknowledged as convenient, cheaper, and ecological. Environmental concerns, overpopulation, and fears for future pandemics, mean that computer conferencing is here to stay. In this connection, we agree with Jewitt that the gaze of the webcam have become perhaps the most challenging of mirrors and we are further inspired to wonder why.

Our visual culture is changing fast. Other people's spaces are becoming the extensions of our own living room as a series of random, free-standing particles and images of persons in little boxes are the collective horizon of our working day. Our own faces appear on our screens, becoming strangely visible, and for the first time in working life a live camera is placed in front of us, so that we may constantly observe ourselves, simultaneously acting while trying to manage, control, identify, and come to terms with our mirrored-self.

Covid 19 created new habits of seeing: the amount of time our faces are available to be looked at and evaluated increased dramatically while the real-time faces of friends, family, strangers, and colleagues, became virtual. In the end, among numerous social changes, Covid-19 gave mirrors of all kinds a spectacular boost, enhancing their aesthetic and social agency. It helped to advance and establish what we will call a "mirror ecology": an environment dominated by the mirrored self-image that engages us in specific actions, in unison with other people. In the context of digital networks, and against the background of emerging social necessities, the self-image appears in different media and social platforms collaborating in the creation of a sense of self-perception, self-representation, and self-knowledge, based on the visibility of a sharable, technologically entangled mirrored-face.

That is a great leap from the traditional use of the mirror for individual self-inspection. As we discuss in the book mirror images did not use to travel and could be dated, exhibited, shared. Moreover, "viewing our idol in the mirror is a transient and lonely experience" (AG: 19). With the use of social media, we included other people in this once private practice. From a mirror-selfie circulating on social media, to the Instagram profile, to the real time digital reflection on our computer screen, the mirrored-face is reaching unprecedented distances and people. And while the digital face gained followers, likes, and visibility, the physical face had to be covered behind a mask. With the masking of the face a medical requirement outdoors, and with the prohibition of meeting friends and family even in our houses, our need for visibility found expression through digital technology. Sending and receiving self-images and spending time in front of

real-time cameras where we could simultaneously gaze at our own faces and the faces of others, we created a culture of shared mirrors. In them, the “entangled face” travel from one social platform to another with a speed and direction we cannot entirely control. Mirror gazing has become a collective habit.

Video conferences has been introduced to our lives long before Covid 19. It was not a bright new technical opportunity that brought about the change in our visual ecology. Yet, through our online meetings, the digitalization of self-reflection has become habitual, an integral part of the modern perception of the self. “To look is an act of choice” John Berger wrote (Berger 2008: 8), but in our culture of shared mirrors, the freedom of *not* looking at us has become questionable. Mirror gazing now feels obligatory. In our webcam interactions, social or professional, our faces always form part of our view. Our faces may even remain there long after we are gone, in the case of a recorded event that will be posted online. Thus, our mirror-image (apart from the ability to be shared and exhibited) acquired new qualities, like permanence and inevitability.

Eventually, how we would appear in a computer conference has become an issue to be addressed, and the internet full of advice on how to best posit our webcam to catch our faces at the most favorable angle. Halo ring lights – lights that illuminate the face and soften the appearance of skin blemishes during video conferences – once used mostly by photographers and professional bloggers, are now widely advertised and bought by people of any age and occupation. Indeed, the amount of work we put into what we make visible (or invisible) in the webcam image has already become an issue of social investigation.

Sociologist Erving Goffman, employing the perspective of the theatrical performance in his micro-analysis of behaviour in mundane contexts, wrote about “impression management” – how we attempt to control other people’s ideas about us by successfully staging a character – and “front and back stage behavior”: front stage performances and events being intentionally visible for the creation and dramatization of a desired self and second stage actions usually (and preferably) hidden from the public eye (Goffman 1978). Social interactions are viewed as performances, shaped by setting and audience, which are being constantly subjected to the threat of errors that can damage self-image and jeopardize team work. Relating to computer conferencing, in the words of Carey Jewitt, we self-consciously stare back and perform ourselves – to ourselves and others. Therefore, our live performances are not only executed



in front of an audience, but also in front of our eyes. We are, in a way, both the actor and the audience: our performance will be judge twice.

As is the case with every performance, the zoom meeting is liable to errors, gaffes, and wrong impressions which may threaten our performance and jeopardize the image we try to build. What we try to achieve is luminous skin, youthful appearance, and confidence – or else a step closer to the precious centre of prevailing ideals concerning beauty and attractiveness. Our efforts, of course, to prevent an error, may very well lead to another. In the case of computer meetings this might mean an inappropriately strong light on our face (looking more like a ghost than looking radiant). The extra stress and overall preoccupation with appearance might hinder our speech or presentation and cause us to underperform. Yet, “appearances” in the age of digital mirrors, cannot be considered as inconsequential. With the self-image occupying so much space on social and professional interactions, manifesting in every sphere of shared life, the mirrored-self cannot be easily dismissed as superficial and immaterial. The webcam with which we become more and more habituated alters the ways we look at our self-reflection – both embodied and figurative. In a similar fashion, the smartphone disturbs the relationships of bodies and mirrors (being often set between the two, to capture a mirror-selfie). On our computer screens we created a new stage for our mirrored-self which is now included during tasks traditionally irrelevant to mirroring, like office work. Now more than ever, we think of ourselves with and through mirrors, and it is through our material engagement with mirrors of all sorts that we imagine, build, and maintained our self-identities. Our appearance is considered capable to credit or discredit our performance and to support or weaken the self we try to project – a wrong image can be interpreted as a performance disruption, a visual faux pas. More than a physical part of us, our face has become a statement: an unwatchable face is an unskilled visual gesture.

What should we do?

Trying not to care about how we look to other people is the expected advice. But is there a more insightful and realistic one? You see, as we write in our book “The need to be accepted and loved by others is a perfectly human characteristic [...]. Yes, beauty is culturally constructed. It changes from place to place and through time, but beauty is important” (AG: 38). According to Philippe Rochat (Rochat 2009: 3), the fear of being rejected by others is the mother of all fears. Avoiding the mirror is not the solution: we must learn how to look in them. Nor is correct to spend our time accusing modern technology: Narcissus, let’s not forget, drowned in

a simple lake. Either in a selfie or in a traditional, humble mirror, we can easily lose ourselves.

Shaun Gallagher focuses his comment on the complex relationship of mirror image and self-perception. Using examples from Wittgenstein and drawing on recent experimental work in psychopathology that indicate a conflict between proprioception and mirrored vision as well as dissociations between first- and third-person perspectives Gallagher argues that mistaking oneself for another and another for oneself in the mirror, even though uncommon, is possible when it comes to mirror gazing. He also takes issue with the mirror's "social eye" and criticizes the value of "simulation" in the study of empathy. Gallagher's critique is important and leads to a better recognition of difference in ethical and political life. In this connection, we refer, in our book, to another risk of mirror gazing. That is, to mistake your image for yourself: we are more than just an image. This also relates to our discussion of the mirror as trap. The mirror, unlike other traps, is set up to catch images, in particular, self-images. We claim in our book that the mirror is our prime weapon for self-hunting. One that functions as a material sign based on the principles of mimesis. In our book we used the example of the Yukaghirs, the Mogolian hunters who disguise themselves as a deer to get close to it and kill it (Willerslev 2004). The hunters dress in fur and wear masks and antlers, they mimic the movement of their prey. They appear as the deer's mirror reflection. The point is for the deer to fall in love with its self by looking at the hunter. The deer will forget its fear and approach the hunter tricked by the love for its image – this self-adoring, vulnerable look is what we call in our book, referring to the variety of mirror gazes, "the gaze of the prey". But in this mimetic game, there is also danger for the Yukaghir hunters: they may forget their human nature and get lost in the world of their prey. What do we mean: staring in the mirror we may sometimes lose our self instead of finding it. "Like the Yukaghir hunter tricked into believing he was actually the animal whose image impersonated, we might come to suppose that we are one with our mirror reflection" (AG: 114).

The mirror-face in the looking glass, or in the zoom camera may be easily accounted as a simple reflection. But our experiences with it are challenging, burdened with our hopes and insecurities concerning and at the same time with social demands and stereotypes. Therefore, the mirror-face – our only means to visually apprehend ourselves is both a product of our making, the phenomenal "I" that observes the world from the "inside" and the social "other" staring at us from the "outside". The inside/outside, self and other, is the innate tension of looking at our self in

the mirror and of conceptualizing our self through the mirror. Blending mimesis with alterity “we enter a domain where the body transforms into an image which transforms into reality” (AG: 116).

We will come back to mirror misidentification later on. Here, returning to Gallagher’s comment we would like to point out that, on the theme of transformation, the mirror as a medium of self-perception is one which can also be transformed: the moment we gaze in it, it becomes an instrument of an existential sort. Making our self-image visible to us, mirrors of all kinds are turned to what philosopher Michael Foucault described as technologies of the self (Foucault 1987). The extent to which this technology concerns us, and its effect on our daily life and actions have obviously being magnified with digitalization. McLuhan famously said “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964), pointing out that, unlike its content, the nature of the medium itself is what really matters albeit it may escape attention. “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from a new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan 1964: 7). As we increasingly live, think, and socialize through digital reflections the mirroring has taken on new roles and responsibilities (social, professional, ethical, and aesthetic). It has expanded human connections and deepened our involvement with our appearance. If the medium is the message, then the message is clear: the mirror-image now demands even more than our attention; it wants to have a meaning.

This brings us to the remarks on mirroring and semiotics by Claudio Paolucci, Luigi Lobaccaro and Martina Bacaro. We agree with their suggestion that a link between Echiian semiotics and Material Engagement Theory (MET. See Malafouris 2013) can prove very advantageous for the long debate on the semiotic value of the mirror image. They frame three points of consensus between Umberto Eco’s thoughts about the mirrors and MET: “i) [mirrors] have the prosthetic status that allows the individual to do pragmatic and epistemic actions; ii) have to be considered for their catoptric rules, inherent to their material structure; iii) trigger the imagination enabling semiotic interpretations”. Carving a conciliatory path between the view of the mirror image as a pre-semiotic phenomenon and the standpoint that mirror images are signs (if we take a non-traditional phenomenological view on signs), their argument reaches MET’s notion of *enactive signification*. Indeed, in our book, combining the comparative spirit of philosophical anthropology with material semiotics we discuss the mirror and its affordances for transparency, opacity, and reflection,

seeking, on the one hand, to explore some of the phenomenological and semiotic challenges that mirroring embodies and, on the other hand, to transform our understanding of ordinary mirror gazing from a passive experience of self-recognition to an active medium of critical self-consciousness. We argue that mirrors as enactive signs do not stand for an object or concept but they bring forth concept and meaning as we stand in front of them, gazing at our reflection. As Paolucci, Lobaccaro and Bacaro write, the mirror is a tool that gives us a face. It makes the semiotic concept of the self possible through the co-presence of “I” and “he” as it actively becomes a cognitive part of the one who gazes in the mirror.

There can be no mirror image in the absence of a perceiving subject. The subject gazing in the mirror and the object inside the mirror are one. “This semiotic conflation, for as long as it lasts, blurs, if not cancels entirely, the distance between subject and object and creates a vacuum of agency that needs to be filled” (AG: 18). Returning to our main idea of mirrors as traps, we write that the mirror resembles a powerful attractor within a dynamic semiotic field of subjectification and self-identification. The mirror enchants its prey operating on the basis of mimesis, enacting a deep experiential “I can see me, but it is not me” confusion. On this subject of the semiotic complexity and metaphysical significance of traps we have borrowed from the work of Alfred Gell (Gell 1996), and his novel appreciation of traps as embodiments of complex intentionalities. Studying traps, Gell argued, we gain information about the disposition and characteristics of the intended victim. Therefore, Gell regarded traps as texts for the victim’s behaviour. The embodiment of a scenario that brings together hunter and prey. The concealed and static violence of a tense bow, revelatory in itself, is a sign that is not a sign at all, and therefore, escapes censorship. But in the trap, we read both the mind of the author and the fate of the prey.

We always “read” our mirrors. “[A] story will always appear in front of the looking-glass along with our reflection. A story that explains us and puts our bodies into words. We share our life stories with the mirror, like we share body memory with our bicycle” (AG: 41). Very few would disagree that we imagine, evaluate, and interpret our self in front of the mirror. Yet, the issue that Paolucci, Lobaccaro and Bacaro raise on the unquivering truthfulness of the mirror is, we believe, more perplexing. They refer to Eco’s idea’s that the mirror offers us a duplication of reality. We may interpret this reality wrong, we can be fooled by mirrors, as he puts it, in the same way we can be fooled by reality. Yet, by not interpreting reality, Paolucci, Lobaccaro and Bacaro argue, mirrors are telling the

truth. In our book we refer to art historian Ernst Gombrich and his experiment where, if we are to circle the outline of our face as it appears at the fogged-up mirror of our bathroom and then check its size, we will find out that the size of our reflected face is actually half the size of our real head (Gombrich 1960). Our point was not only to demonstrate our false conviction that the mirror presents real-size reflections, but also that this revelation does not help us to escape the optical illusion the next time we look in the mirror. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, we argued that our mirror habits are so hard to break, that we will continue to trust the mirror, without bothering to question what else we might get wrong in front of it. But claiming that mirrors do not tell the truth because they may trick us means, Paolucci, Lobaccaro and Bacaro write, activating a “residual kind of ‘representative framework’”. Mirrors tells the truth, they continue, but through duplicating reality they “do something to us and they fool us through the truth”. While mirrors afford fooling, he argues, they also tell the truth, like a door affords opening without implying that it opens by itself.

So, what do we see when we look in the mirror? To answer that the mirror shows us the truth because it depicts a duplication of reality is problematic because, first of all, it conflates two deeply contested terms: reality and truth. Then, the duplication of reality as a reflection on glass, cannot exactly be real (the size of our head does diminish in the mirror). Finally, it implies that there is only one reality and only one truth, which is even more debatable – especially from an anthropological point of view which should allow for ontological multiplicity.

To make things simple, let’s say that reality is all that which exist. Immediately, we stamp onto a hurdle, as in the mirror things only appear. On the other hand, we cannot claim that the things that appear in the mirror are not real. The fact that they appear smaller does not necessarily make them untrue; we all do have a head. The introduction of digital mirroring to our lives only contributed to further confusion: we turn our smartphone towards our face, we look at our mirroring and we take a selfie, applying filters to enhance our appearance. We can perhaps assume that this is a fake image (though not all of it). But then shouldn’t we account for its very real consequences? Is an action based on a lie not real? What about a truth that we deny? The door affords to be opened by humans (but perhaps also by itself, if you fail to account for non-human agencies like the wind, or if you do account for the slow decay of time that will eventually move the door as an endogenetic process) and the mirror affords different realities as well as interpretations in different

parts of the world and in different time-scales. The reality of the shamanic mirror in Mongolia, for instance, is that it contains spirits, it is a portal to the world the dead, and also a weapon against its owner's enemies that emits flashes of light (AG: chapter 6). Talking about mirror gazing we tried to allow space for such a mirror, as well as a perspectival understanding of the act of mirroring, in the sense that a hunter dresses like an animal to mimic its victim and mirror its movement, or a mirror gazing experiment in the controlled environment of a psychological lab.

Being more specific, we agree with Paolucci, Lobaccaro and Bacaro that the mirror provides us with an empirical kind of truth, while simultaneously it plays tricks on us through our material engagement with it. This is indeed its magic. This is also what makes the discovery of a personal truth in the mirror all the more difficult. The "mirror" (in inverted commas, as a term defining a set of universal properties) may tell the truth, but the mirror as a situated thing in our house, or the digital mirror in our smartphone shows us a reality which's truth and meaning we have to pursue and defend for ourselves through our situated practices and modes of engagement. That process, far from plain and simple, is what we try to explore in our book.

It is for the promise of that truth, of the knowledge of the self that we are drawn to the mirror (and often get trapped in it). The mirror, however, made the discovery of that knowledge difficult, as what appears to be is not. We appear to be in the mirror, but we are not. We appear to exist outside of our bodies looking at us, but we don't. We interpret what we see and we try to create our truths, but we do so against truths that have already been established for us by society and its institutions: ready-made narratives propagated by advertising on what is watchable and what is not. Society dictates the "truth" of our appearance, what on us seem beautiful and successful and what we should desperately try to hide.

Carey Jewitt expresses, from a first-person perspective, the challenge sometimes posed by mirror gazing: "Like many women, I have a complex relationship with the mirror. I see my mother in the mirror – I see myself as my mother. I want the mirror to love me but I generally find self-critique rather than the reassurance I seek". What she offers here is both, a very personal and common concern regarding the passing of time, but also a reminder that what we see in the mirror is not necessarily what is there. Professor Gallagher, as we have already discussed, also notes that the mirror is not immune to error through misidentification. He uses the

example of the Alien Hand Illusion to describe how the mirror can disrupt the normal interaction of vision, proprioception and tactile sense.

In fact, a mirror's optical illusion can be very useful – healing, even. In our book we mention occasions where the mirror is used in medical setting to assist the treatment of people that have suffered stroke or experience phantom pain due to amputation or paralysis, mostly by alleviating the pain (AG: chapter 8). This is accomplished by purposefully producing, through mirror gazing, optical illusions where the body appears to be complete, or paralysed body parts appear to be functioning. Jewitt in a similar spirit wonders if the felt skin could provide an alternative route through the mirror for the visually impaired. Indeed, in our society we have been educated to prioritise and value vision over touch, and therefore, the interaction between the two is not yet fully investigated. Through the course of our recent ethnography with potters it became obvious that “seeing in order to touch” and “touching in order to see” are two experiences entangled and interdependent in the process of making. How would this surface in relation with the mirror, and interpreted in terms of self-perception, and self-appreciation could open a new direction for investigation.

Many times, in our book we have pointed diverse ways of looking in the mirror, each representing a different attitude towards our self. From the lethargic and self-absorbed gaze of the prey (finding expression in the eyes of a deer) to the liberating and active gaze of the hunter – a gaze that also ‘feels’ the world and is in harmony with it, we argued about the importance of looking in the mirror with a variety of questions. The mirror challenges us to think what we are. The mirror, after all, turns us all into a spectacle. Surprisingly, and to return to our time and place and to the beginning of our essay, this found a strange relation to Covid-19.

In the dawn of 2021, the masked face, apprehensive of the present, worried about the future, appeared in our mirrors. Months without a hairdresser, tired of home-schooling children, unable to share a smile, the face with the medical mask was the reflection of a face that had gained the right to transcend ordinary scrutiny, a face determined to ask greater questions of its mirroring. After two pandemic years, the masked face has extended the boundaries of its own skin, to embrace a common humanity, and fight for a shared destiny. We concealed our face to protect each other, thus revealing its humanity. Through covering half of its reflection, the face appeared to be standing up for and belong to everyone: a social, unsaleable face. After the dust will settle, despite the exhaustion, and in the wake of a tragedy, we like to think – it gives us courage to think – that

society will look itself in the mirror to see not innumerable, single faces, but the eternally beautiful face of a community of people. This is how we made the mirror to tell a beautiful story.

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