

50 years on: the heterotopian mirror of enchantment, self-reflection and disruption.

Mirrors and Images: Karen Browning

Text: Peter Johnson

Large mirrors are to astrophysics what computational speed is to computing. We want to peer right to the edge of the Big Bang. We want to directly detect earth sized planets circling other stars. And the bigger the mirrors are, the deeper we can stare.

(Dan Goldin, NASA)

The complexity of the mirror as a literary motif arises from the liminal space which it inhabits, being neither entirely subject nor entirely object: the mirror is potentially revelatory of the interior world of the self and yet conversely figures the objectified self within the external world.

(Miranda Anderson)

I dream of a mirror that gives only its own image.

(Matisse)

Foucault's Heterotopia

On 14th March 1967 Foucault gave a talk in Paris to the *Cercle d'études architecturales* in which he outlined for the third time his thoughts on heterotopias. He was reluctant to publish the text but eventually agreed to do so in the context of an exhibition held in Berlin in 1984. The text, *Des espaces autres*, was published by the French journal *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* and translated into English by Miskowic two years later in *Diacritics* as 'Of other spaces'. The journey of heterotopias began.....

In his talk to the group of architects, Foucault attempts to describe certain relational principles and features of a range of cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow 'different': disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory and transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside. Foucault's set of examples of heterotopias include: ships, cemeteries, brothels, prisons, gardens of antiquity, fairs, Turkish baths and many more.....

Heterotopias disturb time, place and our sense of self. They 'reflect', 'represent', 'designate', 'speak about' other sites but at the same time 'suspend', 'neutralise', 'invert', 'contest' and 'contradict' those sites. His dazzling and perplexing examples of heterotopia are embedded in aspects and stages of our lives and somehow both mirror and unsettle simultaneously. In defining heterotopias, Foucault refers explicitly to the space of the mirror which has the extraordinary ability to be both different and the same:

the mirror functions as a heterotopia in the sense that it makes this place I occupy at the moment I look at myself in the glass both utterly real, connected with the entire space surrounding it, and utterly unreal...

The puzzling, disruptive experience of the mirror produces a 'placeless place'. In referring to the mirror, Foucault conjures a spatial instrument, technique and metaphor with rich and complex historical and cultural associations - a space of enchantment, intimate self-reflection and disruption.

Claude's Mirror Cracked, 2014
cast and polished black glass with gilding
(Karen Browning)



The Mirror of Enchantment

The mirror is solid, yet you gaze through it, giving a sense of something beyond, unsettling, hiding and showing at the same time. In antiquity and through to the Middle Ages mirrors were one of the tools of soothsayers and sorcerers, revealing hidden portents. The mirror was also associated with fantasy, fears, deception and temptation. From the 12th to 17th century the church opposed all experiments with mirrors. The world of illusions belonged to the devil, provoking sin, particularly those associated with the perils of sight – pride, self-indulgence and arrogance.

In particular, the black mirror has had the most evocative and magical reputation. Obsidian mirrors were used as funerary objects, found in tombs 8,000 years old in Central Turkey. In antiquity, Pliny had noted that the reflection in a polished obsidian mirror has 'a cloudier appearance than glass', 'reflecting shadows rather than images'. Used by magicians, sorcerers and diviners, the black mirror could contact anyone anywhere, including the dead.

Using mirrors to foretell the future – 'scrying' - was practised by the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, Hebrews and the ancient Chinese. The Italian physician Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) devoted 14 chapters of his treatise to the 'miracles of catoptrics', the "natural magic" of optical manipulations, describing different types of mirrors that make it possible to invert, multiply, make distant, draw near or fragment an object in space.

Experimenting with black cast glass sphere
and reflections
(Karen Browning)

'In these pieces I explore the historical and mystical side of black mirrors, traditionally used for scrying (looking into the future) whilst also combining this with historical use of black mirrors by landscape painters such as Claude Lorrain. Mirrors create another space, altering or confirming a sense of self or place, and through deception, illusion, and reflection provide a luminous space for contemplation'.



The magical mirror has been used by:

- Tibetan Oracle priests to predict the future.
- The Bakongo people of the Congo River to explore past misfortunes.
- South American Ayahuasca Shamans to alter the physical world.
- Fang people of Gabon to access their ancestors (with the help of hallucinogenics).

The self-reflecting mirror

Reflection – from *reflectere* - means to bend, or to turn back, or backward as well as to bring back. Thomas Aquinas offered early etymological link between *specula* (mirror) and the modern meaning of *speculation*:

...to see something by means of a mirror is to see a cause in its effect wherein likeness is reflected and we see that speculation leads back to meditation.

The mirror of medieval spirituality:

..... bore witness to the presence of an immaterial reality in the visible at the same time that it designated the means and levels of knowledge, from “speculation” to perfect vision: to know is to reflect, to pass from tangible vision to the contemplation of the invisible...

The mirror as a metaphor for divine wisdom but it is also at the heart of modern philosophical self- reflection:

Reflection and contemplation are so derived from the mirror that it has come to symbolise thought and awareness...
(Sabine Melchior-Bonnet)

Gasché traces a movement to self-reflection, self-relation, self-mirroring, considering the subject of thought itself:

Since Descartes, moving from a simple consideration of objects as they appear through experience to a consideration of the very experience in which objects are given is perhaps the most important principle of philosophical thinking.

Gasché explains how Derrida eventually debunks this mirror metaphor of self-reflection by referring to what lies at the back of the mirror. The dull surface, the 'tain' of the mirror (from French *étain*), denotes the tinfoil, the silver lining, the lustreless back which is needed for reflection to occur, but which itself lacks any kind of mirroring quality. Derrida exposes the material and practice which produces reflection but cannot reveal its limits. The metaphor of the tain of the mirror suggests what is always out of reach, what lies behind or beneath the paradoxes of self-conscious speculative thought.

The disruptive mirror

For Lefebvre:

‘..... the mirror’s ambiguity is immediately on display. Nothing is more unlike the thing than its image, its other in the mirror’

The space of the mirror in its exactness, ignites, invites multiple ambiguities:

..... ambivalences, equivocations, blends, mixtures, mimicry, uncertain identification, unfamiliarity, deceitful normality, and revealing anomalies..

For Jorge Luis Borges, the mirror is an 'impossible space of reflections' that interrupts ordinary, familiar experience:

It is strange to dream, and to have mirrors
Where the commonplace, worn-out repertory
Of every day may include the illusory
Profound globe that reflections scheme.

John Ashbery, responding to Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, conveys some of the extraordinary effects of the mirror which absorb the gaze and gaze back simultaneously. All that there is to look at in the mirror as self-portrait is this 'Not being-us':

Self-portrait *in a Convex Mirror* (c. 1524)
Parmigianino



Ashbery reiterates the mirror's way of interrupting the commonplace:

..... Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most commonplace
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly.....

Lewis Carroll's Alice of course finds this to be true when she contemplates the 'room you can see through'. The space of the mirror above the fireplace seems exactly the same as her drawing room but the other way round. She probes the glass as it begins to melt and through into the other room notices:

.... that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but all the rest was as different as possible

The pictures come alive, the clock grins and Alice starts to explore a different space, or in Foucault's words, a space 'utterly real, connected with the entire space surrounding it, and utterly unreal...'

Karen making a mould
Image: John Hestletine



Karen Browning has used glass as recurrent medium throughout her career. She holds a degree in Architecture, Oxford Brooke's University, a Masters in site-specific sculpture, Wimbledon School of Art and a Masters in Glass, from Swansea Metropolitan University. She has been Colin Reid's assistant for 12 years, during which time cast glass has become her main medium. Karen uses cast and polished glass to alter perceptions of space through its reflections, both internally and externally. Karen's work is in private collections in Europe Hong Kong and Australia, and has twice been selected for the British Glass Biennale.

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