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Invisible Culture

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The Image Before Me



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Part I: The Lacanian Mirror Machine

This picture is simply what any picture is, a trap for the gaze. In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear.[1](#)

The subject is an apparatus. This apparatus is something lacunary. . . . In the phantasy, the subject is frequently unperceived, but he is always there, whether in the dream or any of the more or less developed forms of day-dreaming. The subject situates himself as determined by the phantasy.[2](#)

Propped up on pillows, the baby is held by a gaze that causes him jubilation. He is

six months, perhaps a year old. He is a girl or a boy, no difference.³ His mother is holding up a toy or a shiny object, or the photographer has not brought a flash but is using fixed lights and this attracts the child's attention. Perhaps the child is smiling in response to his mother's smile. He smiles at his mother and to himself as he recognizes himself in her smile. In other words, he sees himself being seen and this causes him to giggle. However, the baby's pleasure is double-edged, as this moment of self-recognition—to see oneself through the other—is an adventure of blindness and insight, of stability and unease.

Jacques Lacan stages such an adventure in his infamous text, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I* (1949). Like Lewis Carroll, Lacan presents the mirror as a passageway separating two realms of existence. And like Alice, the child's journey is riddled with deception. Propped up before a mirror, the child, in Lacan's words, overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold [his reflection] in [his] gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.⁴ In effect, the child captures a snapshot of himself, an image that affords him a sense of coherency and control. He sees himself performing in a manner that surpasses his motor skills, and it is this sense of outperforming the limits of his body that provides pleasure, the pleasure of the self. However, this image also has an alienating effect. Lacan explains how the child's sense of selfhood is unavoidably burdened with doubt. He claims that by identifying *with* this Ideal-I or *imago* the child situates the agency of the ego, before its social determinations, in a fictional direction.⁵ In other words, our coming-into-being necessitates a coming-into-being other. I know this image before me as me and I know this image cannot possibly be me.

It is within this context of doubt that psychoanalysis frames the constitution of human subjectivity. Exponents of psychoanalysis are seen as anti-humanists because of the challenge they present to the saliency of consciousness in defining human experience. Modern philosophy is understood as beginning with René Descartes (1596–1650) and his claim that consciousness is the main attribute that distinguishes humans from other animals. It is our awareness of being and our ability to reason that separates us from the herd. Descartes arrives at this conclusion after rejecting the various ways humans ascertain knowledge. We cannot trust our senses or opinions because they are open to error and are not "wholly indubitable." The only certainty that Descartes can claim is that he is able to formulate a sense of doubt, and it is this ability that provides unshakable proof of his existence (*I think/doubt, therefore I am*).

Descartes' existence as a human is based on his ability to think and to think about thinking. The validity or truth of his thoughts, in turn, is based on the fact that he

thought them and that his existence cannot be denied. In this twofold move Descartes eliminates doubt from his notion of consciousness. The Cartesian subject is transcendent in that its constitution is independent of historical and cultural change. The environment surrounding the individual may undergo radical change, but his/her ability to think and register change remains unaffected.

As Kaja Silverman states: "Descartes' 'I' assumes itself to be fully conscious . . . and hence fully self-knowing. It is not only autonomous but coherent; the concept of another psychic territory, in contradiction to consciousness, is unimaginable."⁶ The unconscious is, of course, this other psychic territory that is unimaginable to Cartesian thought. By introducing the unconscious, psychoanalysis, in effect, reverses Descartes' logic and reintroduces doubt into the constitution of the subject. Psychoanalysis does not deny my existence as a thinking being, but questions my ability to completely understand the psychic life of my thoughts or statements. In place of the coherent Cartesian subject that acts as a conduit of knowledge, psychoanalysis presents subjectivity as a source of alienation and doubt. The psychoanalytic self is forever split between the conflicting forces of a conscious and an unconscious will. According to psychoanalysis, it is the will of the unconscious, and the sense of doubt that it gives rise to, that form the definitive attributes of human experience.

Lacan begins *The Mirror Stage* by distancing his project from that of Descartes. [T]he formation of the I, asserts Lacan, as we experience it in psychoanalysis . . . leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the Cogito.⁷ Lacan then proceeds to present a model of subjectivity that is parallel to or mirrors that of the Cartesian subject. While Descartes' model provides a place of affirmation, Lacan's suggests uncertainty. Lacan, in effect, rehearses or restages the appearance of the *cogito* so as to pull the rug from underneath its feet. His point of contention is with the blinding principle of self-will that the Cartesian subject employs to remove all doubt. Where Descartes uses methodological doubt to arrive at a place of certainty (*I am where I think*), Lacan uses a congruent methodology that situates subjectivity in a place of doubt (*I think/doubt I see myself there*). The split-subject, Lacan's alternative to the *cogito*, is also the result of a blinding principle of self-will, but one that foregoes any pretensions of self-transparency and self-certainty.

A pertinent lesson of *The Mirror Stage* is that one is never truly alone. In contrast to the conventional understanding of selfhood as a guarantee of an autonomous individuality, Lacan contends that the self exists in a state of unrest as a result of an unresolved encounter with alterity. The human condition for Lacan is inherently troubled as it is founded in a moment of prolonged anxiety. He presents subjectivity as originating with the infant's attempts to identify with his/her reflection. By recognizing him/herself in the reflected image, the infant develops an

awareness of his/her individuality. But this awareness runs contrary to a clear-cut understanding of self and other. The individual is forever split between an internal and external notion of the self, and it is this schism that provides the dynamism that governs human experience. Ontology, in other words, is born out of the play or disturbance that exists between our notions of self and non-self, familiarity and alienation. It is impossible for the individual to gain an epistemological foothold that would allow for a definitive understanding of the self because it is constituted as doubled. For Lacan, as Adam Phillips states, the individual is by definition in excess of [him/herself].⁸ I am never alone because I am never resolved to *the* I that I am.

The mirror stage is the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity, one that will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.⁹ As such, identification is both something of an open wound and a protective shield. The mirrored image or *imago* is the source of an alienating anxiety and the very apparatus that is assumed by the individual to compensate for this anxiety. In assuming this specular *I* the individual inaugurates what Lacan calls the drama of primordial jealousy . . . , the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.¹⁰ This jealousy is the result of a recognized sense of lack or disparity that separates the infant from the specular *I*. Feeling that he/she can never measure up to the mirror image, the infant becomes jealous of it. An internalized rivalry is produced between a projected social self—a self that can assume a relational position with regard to other individuals on the grounds that it appears to be unified—and a natural or instinctual self that is experienced as insufficient or lacking. Through the infant's drive to assume the identity of this imagined social self, instinct becomes something that must be shunned or guarded against.

Standing before the mirror the individual is propelled into a predetermined future. Lacan states:

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into [being mediated by] the desire of the other) and turns the *I* into an apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation—the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex.¹¹

Thus, the assumption of the *imago* constitutes a binding social contract—the family

drama of Oedipal desire. The unresolved narcissistic relationship between the individual and the imago is reconfigured as an unresolved desire for the figure of the mother, and then as the compensational desire for the mother-substitute, the symbolic other. In the infant's assumption of the imago these stages of reconfigured desire do not adhere to a sense of progression or temporality, but unfold simultaneously, so that narcissistic desire for the imago is intrinsically Oedipal and the Oedipal desire for the mother or the symbolic other is intrinsically narcissistic.

The mirror stage marks the child's entrance into what Lacan refers to as the Imaginary Order. It is a stage in the sense of staging an event rather than a period of our life that we pass through. In other words, it is a psychical experience rather than a physiological developmental stage that a human being enters, experiences, and exits. One does not pass through the mirror stage pass through the looking glass to become sutured to an Ideal-I. Instead, the child identifies with the mirror image and enters into a continuous process of staging and restaging his/her identity, a process that situates him/her as forever elsewhere. I am coupled with the mirror image (as I am coupled with the homunculus or little man I carry around in my cortex and in my wallet), but I am also removed from it.

Part II: Hey, let go of my ego

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic and, lastly, to the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.[12](#)

The human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself.[13](#)

We cannot be alone to
experience.[14](#)

Lacan insists that human subjectivity is constituted in a moment of fracture. The total effects of this psychical drama are important to acknowledge. By simultaneously recognizing and misrecognizing himself as the mirrored image, the child stages his own splitting. In effect, he wills himself into being as *always already* split. When the child recognizes himself he recognizes himself as elsewhere, as *always already* doubled, entwined in a complex web of here and there, presence and absence, whole and fragment.[15](#) This constitutes what Lacan will later refer to as the fantasy of *seeing oneself seeing oneself*.[16](#)

Lacan presents this complicated notion of subjectivity as a matter of mere/mirror child's play. He explains how this is a fantasy only afforded humans by referencing behavioral experiments involving chimpanzees, monkeys, pigeons, and grasshoppers. Placed before a mirror, these animals react in a way that suggests that they recognize the image before them: male simians make threatening gestures, female pigeons ovulate, and grasshoppers become social or, as Lacan puts it, gregarious, as they molt and transform from individual insects to an indistinguishable swarm of locust.[17](#) But unlike the child, these animals do not recognize their image as a reflection. Instead, they simply see the mirrored image as another animal. Only humans suffer the fantasy of seeing this other as a composite or Gestalt of self and non-self. In this way, what Lacan stages is the difference between animal reaction and human reflection. This can be understood as the difference between *is* and *as*, the difference between *to be* and *to be like*, the difference between *being* and *representing*. In other words, the child recognizes representation—the image as an image—and the animal does not. This ability to see representation affords the child a sense of mastery, an animal husbandry. And the child laughs, displaying his hard-won reward of being superior to other animals, his twinned sense of humor and doubt.

For Lacan subjectivity is an apparatus, a fiction or fantasy that humans employ to make sense of the world and their place within it. But this fantasy comes at a price. In deploying this apparatus, the subject is inscribed in an economy of lack in which the imago serves as an unattainable standard. This economy of lack is the result of the total dependency humans are subject to during infancy. Again, it is our distinction from other animals that makes humans vulnerable to the lures of subjectivity. As Elizabeth Grosz points out it is our vulnerability that makes humans *naturally social*. Animal survival, she states, is contingent upon the operation of instincts relative to the harshness or generosity of the environment. By contrast, human survival is regulated by the *necessarily social* organization of human life.[18](#)

Subject to what Lacan refers to as a *prematurity of birth* and an anatomical incompleteness, the infant is drawn to the mirror image and drawn into the economy of the psyche as a form of compensation.¹⁹ In effect, subjectivity is a prosthetic—an artificial device—that is deployed to counteract human dependency.

This compensation involves a form of disavowal. Although the child sees his image as image he also does not, or rather, he turns a blind eye to the transparency of the image and invests it with a value that is both intrinsic and extrinsic: *that is me!* The same can be said of the baby photograph before me: I know this image as me and as not me, but nevertheless, this image *is* me. For Lacan this contradictory path functions as a snare, what he calls the snare or lure of the gaze. The gaze is different from the act of looking or seeing. It marks the limits of our field of vision, of what can and cannot be seen. A parallel can be drawn between Lacan's distinguishing the gaze from the act of looking and Ferdinand de Saussure's distinguishing language (*langue*) from the speech act (*parole*). Both the gaze and language function as paradigms that frame human experience.

To elaborate his notion of the gaze as the snare of human subjectivity, Lacan spins many laconic tales. Like Freud, he peppers his texts with personal and zoological parables. One such short anecdote takes place on a small fishing boat belonging to a salty, old fisherman named Petit-Jean. Lacan is a young man who has come to the seashore seeking the real life and quickly finds himself out of his depth. Petit-Jean teases Lacan by pointing to a can of sardines floating in the sea and saying, *You see that can? Well, it doesn't see you!*²⁰ Before attempting to interpret this incident it would be helpful to review a similar anecdote offered by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980):

[T]he other day, in a café, a young boy came in alone, glanced around the room, and occasionally his eyes rested on me; I then had the certainty that he was *looking at* me without however being sure that he was *seeing* me; an inconceivable distortion; how can we look without seeing?²¹

These two anecdotes speak volumes to the precariousness of subjectivity. The can floating on the horizon reflects the glint of the sun and it is this that catches the eye of Lacan. Similarly, a young boy catches the attention of Barthes. In both incidents the look is not returned and Lacan and Barthes are faced with the chiding remark, *Well, it/he doesn't see you!* Both men are presented with a scene in which their sense of being or presence disappears before their eyes, as they are made to face their own insignificance, absence, and mortality.

The image before me also speaks of absence and mortality and of how subjectivity is allied with what Freud designates the death drive or *Thanatos*. The exuberant joy in the image before me not only suggests a form of self-recognition, but it also holds the promise of a time and place that outstrips my memory, suggesting a completely different ontology or experience, what Lacan refers to as the fragmented body or the body in pieces (*le corps morcelé*).¹² This elusive experience haunts me and perhaps functions as a buried agency that commandeers all of my actions and desires in a fantasy of my undoing. The death drive is the impulse to achieve complete effacement. It is an embryonic dream of return in which the self is absorbed in a state of bliss that knows no difference between self and non-self the *jouissance* before difference.

The glint in the baby's eye catches my attention. I see the baby but the baby does not see me. Instead the baby sees the Ideal-I, the I that I can never be. However, it is in this moment of recognition and misrecognition that the baby wills me into being. In the image of the Ideal-I reflected in the mirror the child catches a glimpse of a possible future self. It is this premonition of a future self that causes the baby to assert: I see myself, therefore I am. This is a moment of autogenesis or self-doubling in which the baby gives shape to the split-subject that is me. Such a fantasy circumvents the mother and her absence. In answer to the mother's absence the baby, in effect, produces a baby of his own. The mother becomes the repository of absence itself (the site of lack) and the split-subject (the baby's baby) is inscribed in a revenge plot, as the product of revenge, as a childish declaration of Me! Me! Me! or Who needs you?

The child's assertion of I see myself, therefore I am undermines the force of Descartes I think, therefore I am, because it points to the slippage in Descartes method, the slippage that is Descartes method (the slippage between thinking and being). Descartes tries to align thinking and being, knowledge and experience, by aligning the enunciating I (the thinking subject) and the enunciated I (the posited object). This produces a tautology in which the subject of Descartes sentence (Descartes) is meant to prove the validity of his proposition (that Descartes exists). We can translate this tautology numerous ways including I think am Descartes, therefore Descartes I am. This illustrates how Descartes, like the child, mistakes or misrecognizes his sense of the self his sense of himself as a thinking subject as proof of the self. In this way, Descartes falls victim to the very snare that he attempts to remove from his methodology the snare of assumption.

As stated above, in contrast to the stasis of the Cartesian subject, Lacan portrays subjectivity as a process that is forever fluctuating, forever in a state of becoming. Our sense of subjectivity, our sense of what it means to be human, is necessarily troubled, as one cannot step outside of oneself or one's time and state with an

unquestioning sense of certainty I am that. To this effect, Lacan offers his own version of *cogito, ergo sum*: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think."²³ Lacan's declaration can also be translated in numerous ways, including I know not from where I speak. This is the Lacanian recipe for doubt, a recipe that begs the question: Is it enough to present the subject as decentered, or troubled? What, in other words, are the full implications of Lacan's supposition that subjectivity is a lacuna? What questions can we ask of the Lacanian lacuna? And, if we believe that our questions can never be completely answered, what do we do with this doubt? I would suggest that Lacan provides an ethics of doubt, a model of subjectivity that works against any claims of certainty, such as the various incarnations of I am right and you are wrong.

The baby in the image before me imagines me as image. And I similarly see this image and try to imagine an unimaginable experience, the experience before me. In our imaginings we weave back and forth, here and there, self and other, real and fantastic. When I picture myself I see two incompatible poles: the I that is me and the I that is *always already* other. The separation between the mirror image and the internal notion of the self is never completely resolved or sutured over. As an adult I am still subject to the lure of the imago. The I that I embody inherently suffers an unredeemable loss: the imagined union with the mammiferous mother. But I also incur a gain that causes me jubilation: the imagined union with the specular other. My losses and gains balance out, as they are both equally fantastic.

This play that I am referencing between reality and fantasy, the play between the self and other, between the individual and the imago, is an attempt to restage the fantastic nature of infant's reality. It is also an attempt to restage the rhetorical play evident in Lacan's prose. In *The Mirror Stage* a tension results from Lacan's use of puns and allusions alongside a prose style that is often convoluted or long-winded. What emerges is a convergence of form and content, in which Lacan's description of subjectivity as a form of balancing act between exuberance and constraint is mirrored in his prose style. By using a prose style that is simultaneously euphoric, fragmented, and complex to describe the human condition as such, Lacan's text takes on an overwhelming sense of duality—an incessant doubling or duplicity.

In her study-homage entitled *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, Catherine Clément comments on the overwrought character of Lacan's *The Mirror Stage*. She asserts that when writing *The Mirror Stage* essay Lacan had not yet discovered the virtues of midspeak (*midire*), or saying things by halves; he used to try to say it all²⁴ This desire to say it all, to leave nothing unsaid, is the paranoid desire that haunts language.²⁵ I will never be able to communicate my meaning because meaning is believed to be antecedent to language. When I express myself my

meaning is compromised by language, and, as such, things are always left unsaid or incommunicable. My words also have a meaning that exceeds my intentions (a psychic surplus). The imagined gap between intention and expression in turn becomes an impetus fueling an insatiable, paranoid desire to either leave nothing unsaid or to completely clarify what is being said. This desire seems to be an impetus behind the rhetorical strategy that Lacan deploys in *The Mirror Stage*.

But what about the ease or mastery Lacan displays in mapping the split subject? Does the text not betray itself in its own seamlessness? In the face of the interpretive force of Lacan's text and its presentation of a theory that undermines human agency and leaves the reader somewhat spellbound, I cannot help feeling somewhat duped or cheated. Lacan's essay is a conjuring trick or parlor game in which the figure of the child disappears and is replaced by a fantastic apparatus, the fantasy of a split or doubled subjectivity. This addresses the chimerical character of psychoanalysis itself—how it presents me with a notion of the complex psychic life of the ego while at the same time withholding it from my grasp.

To negotiate the labyrinthine structures of Lacanian psychoanalysis is a humbling experience. This essay is a brief foray; an experiment that raises more questions than provides answers. Such is the method of psychoanalysis itself. The psychoanalytic narrative, as presented in the writings of Freud and Lacan, always begs further explication. *The Mirror Stage* is no exception, as the specter of doubt is given top billing. This is why conclusive statements or arguments about Lacan's essay go awry as they contradict the essay's doubtful nature. In my application of *The Mirror Stage* the only thing that I can say for sure is that I am the baby of this baby before me, the product of his imagination, and, as such, in the face of human experience I will always have more questions than answers. Similarly, the baby, faced with the specter of imago and the adventure of subjectivity, cannot help but giggle.

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1. Jacques Lacan, Anamorphosis, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1981), 89.↑
2. Ibid., 185.↑
3. Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 84.↑
4. Jacques Lacan, The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 4. I have chosen to use this translation in this instance for its clarity.↑
5. Lacan, The Mirror Stage, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Allan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), 2. All subsequent references to *Écrits* are to the 1977 version translated by Alan Sheridan.↑
6. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 128.↑
7. Lacan, The Mirror Stage, *Écrits*, 1↑
8. Adam Phillips, The Mirror Stage: Jacques Lacan and Biography, on-line review of Elisabeth Roudinesco s biography *Jacques Lacan* (<http://slate.msn.com/id/2977>).↑
9. Lacan, The Mirror Stage, 4↑
10. Ibid., 5.↑
11. Ibid., 5-6.↑
12. Ibid., 4.↑
13. Lacan, Aggressivity in psychoanalysis (1948), *Écrits*, 19↑

14. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown, N. Y.: Station Hill, 1988) 25. ↑

15. The phrase, *always already* does not appear in Lacan's Mirror Stage, but is nevertheless appropriate as it expresses Lacan's insistence that the imago is part of a symbolic economy. My source for the phrase is Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1969), where he uses it to express the idea that ideology is ubiquitous and that no individual exists outside of its influence. Althusser acknowledges his debt to Freud and Lacan in an essay entitled *Freud and Lacan* (1964, revised 1969) ↑

16. Lacan, *The Eye and the Gaze* (1964), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 74. ↑

17. Lacan, *The Mirror Stage*, 5 ↑

18. Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 33. ↑

19. Lacan, *The Mirror Stage*, 4 (emphasis in original) ↑

20. Lacan, *The Line and Light* (1964), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 95 (emphasis in original). ↑

21. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Noonday Press, 1981), 111 (emphasis in original). ↑

22. Lacan, *The Mirror Stage*, 4 ↑

23. Lacan, *The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud* (1957), *Écrits*, 166. ↑

24. Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 88. ↑

25. This is what Jacques Derrida refers to as logocentrism ↑

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