

MIRRORS THAT POUT:
Subjectivity in the Age of the Screen

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THE SCOTT ROGERS GOOGLE PROJECT

How many Scott Rogers does it take to find Scott Rogers? An interesting paradox since the more Scott Rogers one finds, the more difficult it is to say which Scott Rogers one was looking for. Equally, the more Scott Rogers discovered, the less Scott Rogers is able to just be himself, the less distinct is each and every given Scott Rogers, the more each begins to diffuse into the nebulae of Scotts-Rogers, the less recognizable is any given Scott Rogers among the horde of others who, by all accounts, seem *just like him*.

This would seem to be the central point of a recent project by the artist Scott Rogers (2005). The “Scott Rogers Google Project” is a collection of Internet links—a portal to all things Scott Rogers—and ultimately, a virtual icon to his material disappearance.

Imagine how the story might unfold . . . I look for myself on the internet. I find, not the self I expected but instead a horde of doppelgangers: a superfluity of Scotts-Rogers, each implicated in a real-life actuality which is not mine. An excess of Scott Rogers perhaps, the 80,000 “hits” on a single name casting screenal uncertainty on the identity of any given one, shadow-games of an electronic sun. And yet, in each manifestation of Scott Rogers I nevertheless find something familiar, even if it is only a name.

What happens when one begins to search for oneself, to search for self-knowledge and self-understanding, only to find oneself multiplied and fragmented? One’s face is the same as



Figure 2. *Self-portraits as Scott Rogers*. Scott Rogers, 2004–2005. Courtesy of the artist.

someone else's, at least insofar as identity involves putting a face to a name. Here, what seems like an intensely narcissistic endeavor—the competition for a name, the competition for Google ratings—takes exactly the opposite form: a dissolution of particularity under the auspices of the multiple. In the words of Scott Rogers (personal communication, 2006), the piece is “more like channel surfing than narcissism,” a narcissistic hall of mirrors perhaps, in which one perpetually appears to oneself differently, a kaleidoscope of Scotts-Rogers coming in and out of their own form of primetime representational existence, or perhaps emerging only during life's commercial breaks.

Walter Benjamin (1968) has argued that because of the infinite reproducibility of the photographic image, it makes no sense to ask after the *original* photograph. Is the same case not perhaps true here? Would the “real” Scott Rogers please stand. How quickly we find, then, that all Scott Rogers are in fact real—an army of Scotts-Rogers, or an internal conflict, externalized in new key. We understand of course what it is like to be in conflict with ourselves, not quite sure what our opinions are or could be, not quite sure what course of action we might choose to pursue. The case is not different, despite the fact that each Scott Rogers is his own individual. One might look at this as a collectivity of sorts, multiple personalities competing for attention. Is the real Scott Rogers defined as the one who one meets first? By all experiential accounts this would seem to be the per-

sonal horizon of Scott Rogers. Upon a second meeting might one not proclaim: "I know someone else with that same name!" One becomes two.

But from some perspectives, isn't this exactly what has always been in a name? A label of individualized belonging, unchosen by those who wear them, often chosen in fact to reference *someone else*? I have my grandfather's name, my father the name of his father, my brother my father's, and so the story goes. I have friends named after poems, seasons, and celebrities, friends whose names were chosen even for the simple aesthetic pleasures of pronunciation—but I know few people whose names were simply *made up* or *chosen for no reason*.

So, as the proverb goes, What's in a name? At least a horizon of sorts, an ordering of the individual, and yet, as Roland Barthes (1968) says: "The content of the word 'Order' always indicates repression" (p. 26). We are bound to our names, bound consequently to a named deferral of precisely the uniqueness of individualized belonging, bound, in the end, to something else, something that defies our self-conception, rendering each and every named individual *in excess* of themselves. Here, the name takes on precisely the *inevitability of being someone else*.

Or is it the other way around? Perhaps here the multiplicity of Scott Rogers in fact requires that differentiation be made, requires precisely the disappearance, not of the individual into the group, but rather of the group itself? Perhaps there is more at stake here than the simple (and common) dismissal of subcultural identity—the awkward category of those who are so strongly individualized, *just like everyone else*? Does it matter if one is a punk or a skater, a hippie or a goth, an anarchist or a Scott Rogers? Perhaps in the case of the *cult of Scotts-Rogers* the point to be made is exactly that now the grounds for separation require that there be no Scott Rogers at all, no such name, no such category. Perhaps, in a strange and subtle twist, the "Scott Rogers Google Project" is in fact more of an epitaph than a reunion—monument to an individual who has come up against the horizon of his name, from which only two responses seem probable: Here one either finds one's name and loses oneself, or one finds oneself in losing one's name.

CYBERNETIC PSYCHOANALYSIS

The commonly held view of electronic and virtual technologies—from Marshall McLuhan (1964) to Paul Virilio (1994, 2000), Jean Baudrillard (1993, 1994) to Arthur Kroker (1992, 2004)—is that they extend us (corporeally and cognitively) outside of ourselves. This, of course, is in direct contradiction to psychoanalytic theory—in particular in its Lacanian formulation—in which the self is already extended, fundamentally self-alienated, as a result merely of being itself (Lacan, 1999). There are a variety of ways to understand this paradox, from the accusation of error levied against techno-theory to the similar accusation against psychoanalysis itself. But what if neither is wrong? In other words—and understanding that the common denominator of such an exploration is not the attribution of correctness, but rather the applicability of any given ideology to an understanding of itself—what if the reason why both perspectives make sense is that both are correct?

One way into the complication that this question sets up is to construe these seemingly mutually exclusive theories as identical. This is in fact rather simple. If, for example and according to McLuhan (1964), “the medium is the message” (p. 24) and, at the same time, “the content of any medium is always another medium” (p. 23), then would this not be, in fact, to say that the content of a medium is always deferred? By applying this to psychoanalysis could we not force McLuhan and Lacan into a position of agreement on precisely this question—the “self,” as a medium of messages, always has its content in a deferred fantasy of itself as another medium, a deferred fantasy of itself as another? Or, could we not with equal facility understand this question through Kroker (1992), who asserts that individuals are literally “possessed” by technologies, possessed by an inaccessible fantasy of themselves as Other, as grown through the (technological) interaction with the mirror itself? Here could we not in fact declare that the mirror itself is another instance of technological extension?

Another, and perhaps better, way to understand this interrelationship is through a more linear filter. It is simply to say that the reason why technology can be so seductive is because it

speaks directly to who we already know ourselves to be but are unwilling to admit to being. A fantasy without content (or with conflicted content)—such as the fantasy offered by psychoanalysis—is rarely compelling, particularly when compared to the prefabricated fantasies of television (reality TV or otherwise), the walking soundtracks of iPods and Walkmans, or the information databases of the Internet, which offer prefabricated fantasies of everything from terrorism to lovemaking to shape-shifting. Here, the seduction of technology is precisely that it fulfills our fantasies without emphasizing their vacuous nature—no trauma of misunderstanding, only the inspiring sounds of drum and bass that allow me to groove my way through life.

In fact, what might be asserted is that if there is a problem with techno-theory at all it is precisely that it misunderstands technology as its object. Here one might remember the words of Martin Heidegger (1977), who declared so convincingly that “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (p. 4). It begins to seem that in fact technology is a psychoanalytic facilitator—anaesthetizing the irreconcilable trauma of being by precisely *satisfying the desire to be someone else*, that desire that psychoanalysis will tell us we all possess, irrespective of our personal knowledge or self-actualizing potential. (Is this not the ultimate consequence of Žižek’s [2000, 2004] emphasis on the *fantasy* of the self?) The problem with technology is not in any way technological, the problem rather is that this “extension of the self” is entirely *natural*, itself in fact our condition of being in the world. Consequently, techno-theory does itself an injustice by asserting that its object of study is technology, for it is precisely the question of *humanity* that allows for this extension in the first place. We have always and already been other to ourselves, extended well beyond our self-conceptions, and it is no surprise that we encounter ourselves as such when faced with technology. More surprising perhaps is that we did not encounter ourselves as such sooner, for technology is not needed for such an encounter. Yet most certainly the stakes of the question are raised when technology assumes the place of the (self) conflict we have been denied, simply by virtue of *actualizing the fantasy of ourselves as Other*.

Perhaps one must pause here to set the stage for the discus-

sion that ensues, for it is no simple assertion to declare that a technological understanding of the self yields new insight into the question of psychoanalysis in a contemporary world. Rather, one faces the possibility not that technology is anything new, but just the opposite: Technology has always been the horizon of human self-conception, and a fantasy denied is no less actualized for its denial.

OPTICAL INVERSIONS

. . . the proper reply to the postmodern doubt about the existence of the ideological big Other is that it is the subject itself who doesn't exist.
 —Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and The Dwarf*

One must perhaps add a caveat to an exploration such as this, an admission that the question of the self and its self-representations has long been a source of concern to scholars, philosophers, and psychologists seeking an entry point into the nuances of possible and actual existence. The French theorist Michel Foucault (1997) once said “We must sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves” (p. 226), yet the price to be paid for such an understanding is precisely the disappearance of that which we know into the knowledge of what can then be merely a form of *living death*, a postmortem existence of sorts in which one has, ostensibly, chosen self-knowledge over having a self.

But it is also worth remembering that this is not a new problem. In fact, since the birth of the image out of Plato's cave (circa 360 B.C.), humanity has been separated from itself precisely by its self-knowledge—its *image*—given the form of that which we (mistakenly) understand ourselves to be. In fact, one might even go as far as to propose that we have already decided to abandon ourselves for the sake of the image—a choice predetermined by precisely the social and cultural imperative to *know*.

In the same passage, however, Foucault (1997) also says something else: “We have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourself” (p. 226); it is here that the existential loop is completed. It is paradoxical, of course, but one is always well advised to take apparent paradoxes seriously, for upon closer examination they often reveal *exactly the same thing*.

Consider what might seem at first to be a rather arbitrary example: the optical dynamics of appearance itself. We understand that the world around us appears as a function of *reflected light*—which is to say that light hits an object or body and is reflected back at us as the (apparent) image of that object. This is true for any object that does not directly emit its own light (ourselves included) and is thus required to *borrow* light from the world around it in order secure a worldly appearance. We will claim, for instance, that a tree appears during the day because sunlight hits the tree and is reflected back to us—allowing us to perceive its image. First tenet of the image: It requires illumination.

There is a nuance, however, involving the nature of an image that is always indebted to its source of illumination. We know, for example, that sunlight is considered to be *white light*, while fluorescents have a rather greenish tinge and normal room light is slightly yellow. We also know that to make a drawing with green ink on white paper will yield a green drawing under normal circumstances. Illuminated with green light, however, the image of the green drawing will disappear, again due to the principles of reflected light: A white surface will reflect all colors of light that come into contact with it, whereas a green surface will only reflect green. But here, because all colors of light coming into contact with the white paper surface are, in fact, green, the two distinct surfaces appear, for all intents and purposes, identical. Illuminated with purple light (the color optically opposite to green), the green drawing will appear black, since it will in fact absorb all colors of light that are not green. Second tenet of the image: Like reflects like and absorbs all that is different.

Consequently, one cannot simply say that the image is an observation of light reflected off an object. Although the image may well be the reflected light of an object, there is a simultaneous *absorption principle* in play—one that holds a great deal of value for the understanding of the spectral residue of appearance itself. For example (and to repeat), a tree appears green because sunlight hits the tree and is reflected back to us. Yet somewhere in this process the *white* light of the sun is perceived by us as a *green* image of the tree. What we mistakenly dismiss as inconsequential is precisely the absorption principle that

would have all colors *except* green absorbed by the tree: The tree in fact *refuses* green, reflecting it—rejecting it—back as the light-detritus of image appearance. Third tenet of the image: The world of appearances is a world of refused light.

The understanding of appearances consequently always appears exactly as it is not—the condition of a tree appearing green is that the tree (physiologically) rejects its own image. In other words, it is no longer enough to examine that which is perceived—in fact, the very mechanisms of perception require reexamination in order to illuminate our misunderstandings of our own experience. Therefore, if trees reject green light, then by all accounts and despite the fact that this is not at all how it “seems,” trees must in fact be the opposite of green—the color of the absence of green. Again, basic optical light theory will tell us that white light (from the sun) minus green light (from the image of the tree) leaves a residual presence of *magenta*: Thus, under the dim light of an orange sky, the purple tree sways gently in the breeze while a white crow taunts a blue tabby cat on the prowl for black eggs. The world of apparent phenomena can be nothing other than a *negative-image world*, and one might strongly assert that in both consciousness and optics alike *the self appears to itself exactly as it is not*—this in fact being the *condition of appearance*. *The image world is a world of refused light, and we—as creature of image—are a function of light rejected into appearance*. Final tenet of the image: To know oneself is to abandon oneself as (optically) other.

Thus, in a theory of optical inversion we find the reconciliation of Foucault’s paradox. One’s self-knowledge and self-sacrifice are no longer in opposition; in fact, knowledge itself is revealed as *directly* correlative to abandonment, and understanding and alienation become equivalent. If this dynamic seems familiar, it is, of course, because it is the same dynamic that has always been at the root of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis itself: inevitably alienated from ourselves, due to the self-understanding engendered by that first encounter with *the mirror* (and, of course, the subsequent encounters with ourselves as irreconcilably divided). In other words, the self is born through its alienation from itself in exactly the same way as the image is born in the *traumatic inversion* of refused light. Just as the psychoanalytic self is irrec-



Figure 3. *Negative-image self-portrait.*
Ted Hiebert, 1997.

oncilable with its Other (Lacan, 1999; Žižek, 2000), so too would the reconciliation of the image result, not in a higher understanding of its structural dynamics, but rather in its literal *phase cancellation*: The collapse of an image into its (objectified) Other would (optically) yield only its *disappearance*. To reunify the green and the purple would effectively make a tree *disappear*, and, one might suggest, the same is true for consciousness itself: The reunification of the split engendered by the mirror stage would effectively erase the very consciousness it attempts to unify.

MIRRORS THAT PUNISH

[Psychoanalysis] allows us to formulate a paradoxical *phenomenology without a subject*—phenomena arise that are not phenomena of a subject, appearing *to* it. This does not mean that the subject is not involved here—it is, but, precisely, in the mode of EXCLUSION, as the negative agency that is not able to assume these phenomena.

—Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*

Interestingly enough, we find psychoanalysis here already on the *virtual* side of the optically inverted—not, in other words, on the side that itself appears, but rather already *inside* the very rejected appearance of optical existence. It is no surprise that the alienating function of image-generation finds a direct correlation with the generation of cognitive (split) consciousness out of the ashes of reflection. Consider Lacan's (1999) formulation of the consequences of the mirror stage: "We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (p. 62).

Lacan was astute. For while the mirror image allows us the unprecedented ability to relate to ourselves visually, it is nevertheless never quite in the same way as someone else might relate to us. Lacan aptly pointed out the differentiation in *scale* that accompanies the perception of oneself in the mirror—a mirror image is always *smaller than lifesize* due to the receding perspective that doubles the distance between oneself and the mirror surface. Likewise, the mirror image is always *reversed*, and given the fact that few faces are perfectly symmetrical (and, even if they were, most gestures immediately rupture corporeal symmetry), this also sets up an insurmountable barrier to the perception of oneself *as one is*. In the mirror image, we encounter ourselves in a way that *nobody else can—optically and cognitively*—and likewise, the encounter of oneself according to the terms of others is *optically impossible* through the interface of mirrored mediation.

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size [*un relief de stature*] that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. Thus, this *Gestalt*—whose pregnancy should be regarded as bound up with the species, though its motor style remains scarcely recognizable—by these two aspects of its appearance, symbolizes the

mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination. . . . (Lacan, 62)

It is here of course that the self is born as the immanently unrealizable fantasy of itself, since it cannot optically appear to itself in a form that convinces it of its congruency with the world around it. Always backward—when I move my right arm I see only the movement of my left—always smaller than life—to be larger than life would, then, be to mistake myself for my own fantasy of myself—the best that I can hope for is the simple slogan “objects in this mirror are closer than they appear.” In the words of Žižek (2004): “What characterizes human subjectivity proper is . . . the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject” (p. 96).

Here one might, in fact, posit that there is an (optically *and* cognitively) *imposed distance* necessitated by the principles of self-reflexivity, in which one’s fantasy too will always be somewhat *closer* than it appears, though never quite close enough to touch—the optical illusion of reflected distance is both a *myth* and a *reality*—and both *at the same time*. The self is, itself a sort of *Zeno’s Paradox* (see Loy, 1997) in which one only approximates oneself in terms of *incremental division*, never allowing for a meeting point since one must always travel half the remaining distance, and then half that, and so on. Thus, “our painful progress of knowledge, our confusions, our search for solutions, that is to say, precisely that which seems to *separate* us from the way reality really is out there, is already the innermost constituent of reality itself” (Žižek, 2004, p. 56).

It is no small matter, however, that both Lacan and Žižek seem to have missed the generative dynamic at the root of the image *itself*. In other words, the *identification* with one’s image is a *misidentification* or, to put it more aptly, an identification with the discarded image that is the consequence of optical (reflective) appearance. To expand the Lacanian theory of cognitive formation along the lines of the image as *inverse* as well as *reverse* is to force the theory of the mirror stage into a position where it, too, is largely inverted—for the most part because of a misattribution of the *causality* of the image, and the consequent misformulation of the *implications* of this generative dynamic. Like

the problem with Zeno's Paradox, psychoanalysis posits a *continually shifting horizon* of assessment, from *within* which one always finds oneself *halfway*—unable to exit the dynamic of self and unable to actualize it. Just as I feel I begin to approach the fantasies of myself, I find those fantasies changed, and the search must begin anew: At best, the psychoanalytic self can only ever be *halfway to nowhere*.

For this reason, one might posit something of an error in the psychoanalytic formulation of subjectivity, an error that arises due to the personification of the image—the *imago*—as a contingent horizon to which the self will always (in self-conception) hold itself accountable. Are we surprised that the image rejects us, imposing an alienating distance between ourselves and our self-conceptions? Are we surprised that the image also shifts in accordance with our self-understandings in order to forever maintain that distance as *exactly double*? In short, are we surprised that that which we rejected (as its condition of appearance) *rejects us back*? Consequently, rather than Žižek's (2004) assertion that the psychoanalyst's "ultimate aim is to deprive the subject of the very fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of his (self) experience" (p. 96), should we not also invert this formulation such that the task of the psychoanalyst is not in any way to deprive the subject of his or her fantasies, but rather to *actively cultivate them*?

It might, at this point, be evident where the argument is leading. For it is not the structural dynamics of either the mirror stage or of psychoanalysis proper that are under question here, but rather their *effect*. In particular, the claim that must be made is that the mirror stage (or psychoanalysis), as the attempt to reconcile an individual with the irreconcilability of his or her own traumatic (optical) division, already assumes a traumatic consequence to what is in fact a *self-initiated* phenomenon. That is to say, at the core of psychoanalysis itself is an insistence on the *traumatizing* effects of physiological existence, the *traumatizing* effects of fantasy, the *traumatizing* effects of what is (in both optics and psychoanalysis) an *inevitability* of appearing other to oneself.

The argument, consequently, is not merely structural. Rather it is to call into question the *psychology* of psychoanalysis,

and in particular the *traumatic imperative* which, for all intents and purposes, seems entirely unnecessary. Why, in other words, must the fantasy of oneself as another be responsibly denied, particularly when we already know this to be in fact the *condition* of being oneself in the first place? Under such circumstances, should not the fantasy be actively cultivated as the one *truth* about ourselves of which we can be certain? A negative truth, a nonsensical truth, a truth of *not being*, which paradoxically itself engenders *all possibilities of being*, since *being* (under such circumstances) is reducible to *pure fantasy*—a cognitive fantasy that exists *without image*. Image, instead, is here acknowledged not as the grounds of fantasy proper, but more properly, that which fantasy itself must reject in order to come into (cognitive) existence.

We exist *without image*, this being the condition of being. That psychoanalysis (and cultural theory, and philosophy in general) tells us otherwise does not make it so, and to properly understand the dynamic that Lacan wished to trace we must resort not to the trauma of appearances – not to the cognitive transformation that occurs when we *assume* an image – but something substantially more convoluted. The trauma is being taught that we assume something that we, in fact, have always rejected, that from the start what Lacan would in fact have us *assume* is *our own rejections of ourselves*. Here one must return to the *absorption principle* of light—to the dynamics of optics rather than the assumptions of cognitive generation—and observe more properly that the mirror stage encounter is not in any way an encounter with oneself, nor properly the symbolic moment in which the subject is born through assuming an image, but, rather more simply, the mirror stage is a *second-order rejection* of the *imago*, where we (re)assimilate our own fecal residue of appearance.

This assertion is not intended to undermine the psychoanalytic emphasis on the traumatic effects of appearance. Rather, it is to reformulate it in new key, as the fantasy at the core of psychoanalysis itself: What is perpetuated by psychoanalysis is not the trauma of fantasy, but rather the fantasy of trauma: *the fantasy of oneself as irreparably traumatized*. Under these signs of (mis)understood (mis)recognition, one might posit psychoanalysis itself as a sort of *mirror that punishes*, inevitably reflecting back the mistaken conclusion that reflection itself is responsible for

our cognitive duality, when in fact the *rejection* of duality has always been the condition for (cognitive) appearance. Here the misrecognition is precisely *not* of oneself as another—the misrecognition is that there ever was an apparent self to begin with.

Seven years of bad luck for those who break a mirror—a lifetime of bad luck for those whom the mirror breaks.

MIRRORS THAT POUT

We thus find contemporary psychoanalysis in somewhat of a Catch-22. On one hand, under the sign of the discarded image, Lacan's (1999) "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the [Psychoanalytic] I" is rendered, for all intents and purposes, entirely redundant. On the other hand, this redundancy is no less immanent to the cognitive experience of oneself as another that has always formed the central premise of psychoanalytic pursuits, and thus no less traumatic for its redundancy—unless, that is, one can posit an alternative model through which to reactualize psychoanalysis for its deep understanding of the *implications* of alienation without retreating to its insistence on alienation-as-traumatic.

There is something to be said for what amounts to the *normalization* of fantasy. Far from making psychoanalysis a redundant practice, it is through the redundancy of impossible accountability of a fictionalized self to a discarded (reflected, rejected) image that the perpetually inaccessible dialogue between images and fantasy is initiated, thus making their relationship one of pure repetition which quickly becomes monotonous and therefore, according to Žižek (2003), "demands the highest creative effort" (p. 41). This, in fact, makes psychoanalysis an *aesthetic* practice in which one is coached, not toward a reconciliation of trauma nor even toward the acceptance of its perpetuity, but into the cognitive possibilities for *refashioning the fantasies* that cannot be made to disappear *even though they no longer have an image*.

One might suggest a simpler formulation in order to condense the disparity between the examples of the optical image and the image of self-understanding (the structural "error" that causes a split between the self and itself), for both the optical

image and the cognitive image of self hold together a similar territory, and, in both cases, it is the self (i.e., the *fantasy*) that is always the specter of its image. The problem, in other words, is not phrased as the attempt to understand how an image can be mistakenly generated, but rather how the self is always misunderstood due to its (supposed) accountability to that which it has rejected. Once we understand, however, that an image can *only* be mistakenly generated (because the nature of the image is to be the discarded residue of being), the stage of fantasy is entirely reversed. Now, if I must maintain the (cognitive) image of myself (as Other), it is only in order to avoid accepting myself *as fantasy proper*, to affirm (at least) the *possibility* that I exceed in some way my own fantasies of myself. This, in other words, is to insist on the *fantasy of reality* by denying *the reality of fantasy*.

Without an image to confirm this excess (for the image, as Lacan, 1999, showed, always *rejects* the formulation of the fantastic—thus the entry into *traumatic reality*), the practice of fantasy will always remain bound by the impossibility of appearance. The image, in other words, no longer confirms the fantasy—not even spectrally—and we encounter ourselves as *fantasies without possible referent*. The psychoanalytic trauma, if it is to be maintained at all, is simply the inability to accept ourselves as always the instance of completed fantasy, whatever form that fantasy might take.

We find an alternative to the mirrors that punish in the *frustration* of accountability to one's image. If one is to be held accountable at all, it is no longer in any way *to one's image*, but rather only *to one's fantasies*. Here we find the contribution of techno-theory to the question of psychoanalysis, for under the signs of electronic technologies something quite different happens to the question of the image.

Again I think of optics—this time virtual optics, which do not obey the principles of reflected light and which have no need of the absorption principle that will forever contextualize the reflected image as a rejected image. Rather, the virtual participates in exactly the opposite phenomenon, what photographers call *incident* light, or light that is transmitted directly—emitted—without a mediating reflection. Think of the computer screen or the television, whose rear-projected image always

seems exactly as it is, since there is no real-object refraction required for the redirection of light. In incident light, the object is always self-illuminating, self-revealing, stripped of its secrecy and mystique. In other words, we find for the first time the possibility of a *nontraumatized image*—one capable of rendering fantasy for the simple reason that it never pretended to be real.

McLuhan (1964) says, for example, that the electronic age has created a “totally new environment” which has as its content “the old mechanized environment of the industrial age,” and, further, that we are only ever aware of the (old) content, and not the (new) medium (p. ix). This example is important, for with the birth of the *projected (technological) image*, we find the “content” of subjectivity entirely transformed. If it was the body itself that was the content of the reflected (mirror) image, it is precisely this reflected body (and not the biological body proper) that is the content of the projected self. Thus, under the sign of the virtual, self-conception can be malleable because we understand that the reflected image was already a mistaken attribution of self. In other words, given the (new) horizon of virtual identity, there is no question about the recuperation of an *authentic* self-image—and consequently no psychological stakes in a *proper* appearance—because the reflective self-image has always been only a myth of itself.

We also consequently find, in the virtual image—the incident image—an image that does not structurally impose a cognitive division of the subject. Rather, if such a division is noted in relation to the virtual, it is always because it belongs to a *fantasy of trauma*. The problem, in other words, is not in any way that the virtual sets up a barrier to the real, a fantasy that must be deployed and accepted in order to set the grounds for a participation that will always remain slightly ironic because it is forever unredeemable in a real-world context. Rather, the problem is that the virtual in fact is always too accessible, too real, too familiar, too close, and what becomes unbearable is the understanding of oneself *exactly as one wishes*.

Again, McLuhan (1964) has something to offer—particularly in his denotation of the difference between hot (nonparticipatory) and cool (interactive) media (pp. 36–44). For under the signs of the reflected self-image, as proposed by Lacan, the self

is rendered as an essentially “hot” entity. In other words, the self is not grown out of interaction, but is formed out of the punishing and fragmenting experience of the mirror. Although it may seem that any mirror interaction must be participatory, in that it involves the presence of oneself looking at oneself (in particular to notice the effects of distance-distortion and reversed image), the *effect* of this interaction, in its structural essentialism, does not in any way allow for an interactive participation. The medium is the message, and the one-way gaze of the mirror will *impose* the “alienating destination” on the individual “situat[ing] the agency of the ego . . . in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone” (Lacan 1999, p. 62).

In contrast to this a priori alienating destiny of the reflective image, the projected image is “cool” in its constitution, depending entirely upon the possible horizons of fantasy which the individual mobilizes on his or her own behalf. This is not necessarily a liberating dynamic, as the participatory self-implications of paranoia, perversion, and the like are just as accessible to the subject as the liberatory self-constructions of possible fantasy. The point, then, is not to predetermine the *content* of fantasy, except to say that its only horizon is that which is literally *projected onto it* by the subject.

To reflect on this distinction between reflected and incident (projected) light is to enter into a second-order discussion of reflection, of mirror-play, of alienation—not this time as the traumatic separation between selves and themselves, but as a trauma of the inverse sort: the trauma of self-proximity, of self-knowledge, of self-understanding. Within this second-order discourse, no longer is the mirror simply the inanimate index of alienated appearance; rather, the mirror now reveals itself as doubled in equal ways, personified by necessity as the exorcist of the (image of) self from (the reality of) its fantasies.

Consequently, under the sign of the *technological* image, unfettered from the absorption principle, we face only the *immanence of completed fantasy*, that which Baudrillard (1994) calls “the divine irrelevance of images” (p. 3) or, more simply, the “simulacrum” (p. 6) as itself the *floating symptom* (and not any longer the authentic consequence) of self-image. The simulation becomes

real, and in doing so *replaces* the realities that came before it. This is, of course, what we were facing anyways, only this time there is no specter, no *traumatic haunting* of the self by its self-image. Now, in fact, there is *only fantasy*, as the singular horizon of aesthetic self-rendering. Even slogans such as the recent television advertisement for Sprite which suggests that “image is nothing, thirst is everything” is itself rendered *as image*—the image of image-less-ness becoming the central *branding* principle—a *fantasy* principle that effectively replaces the absorption principle itself. No longer the reflected image—now we encounter only the *projected images of self-fulfilling fantasy*.

The technological image allows for us to accept ourselves as fantasy, indeed to indulge in the nontraumatic freedoms of not-being. Without the traumatic control of mirrors that punish, these mirrors too are discarded along the way—reflection becoming no longer necessary, for it is now *projection* proper that forms the horizon of subjectivity. While our fantasies begin to proliferate, the lost horizon of the analogue mirror, disappointed and neglected – its bid of doubled rejection finally reconciled—can only pout in a last attempt to revive the traumas upon which its power previously depended.

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