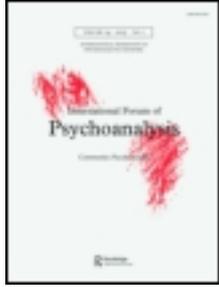


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Narcissism as mastered visibility: The evil eye and the attack of the disembodied gaze¹

CARLO BONOMI

Abstract

The gaze is originally experienced as a *disembodied force*. This experience is discussed here from a psychopathological prospective and from a developmental perspective. In certain states of regression, when the boundaries between the self and the others are fading away, the gaze is again experienced as a disembodied force that radiates from the eyes and can dangerously penetrate into the mind. The body and its extensions are usually used as a shelter. The body performs this sheltering function in a natural and silent way, and only when this function is lacking do we become aware of it. Shame then signals the failure of the ordinary sheltering function performed by the body. If the external body is not sufficiently cathected, its sheltering function is also decreased, to the point that the body is experienced as transparent, and the most intimate feelings and thoughts become dangerously available to others. In primitive societies, this situation is reflected in the universal belief in the “evil eye,” the most common defense against the evil eye having been a representation of an erect penis. In ancient Rome, the phallus-shaped amulet used to ward off the evil eye was called the “*fascinum*”: this magic phallus was supposed to neutralize the attack by *fascinating* the disembodied gaze, that is, by binding it (from the latin verb *fascio*, *fasciare*, to bind). The construction of *mastered visibility* is an organizer of the ego structure. The fascination of the mythical Narcissus for his own mirror image illustrates a central moment of the dialectical construction of the self: the effort to bind the disembodied gaze that is threatening the self, by giving a body to it and by fixing it to an image. Narcissism is thus the effort to bind an almighty free-floating gaze.

Key words: *gaze, eye, fascination, phallus, exhibitionism, narcissism, mirroring, mirror stage, specular image*

Narcissism as lack of boundaries

The original theoretical concept of narcissism as the libidinal investment of the ego (Freud, 1914) or, as later clarified by Hartmann (1950/1964), of the self, has in the course of time lost its energetic connotation, becoming more and more the title of the developmental stage in which the boundaries between the self and the object have not yet been clearly defined (Pulver, 1970). Such a shift has modified and enlarged our way of thinking of narcissism. Thus, in the 1980s the idea emerged that narcissistic states are characterized by a disruption of the capacity to integrate subjective and objective perspectives on the self, to integrate the immediate experience of oneself, and the self-observation of oneself as an object among other objects (Bach, 1985). According to this model of the mind, which emphasizes self-reflexivity, the overcoming of narcissism consists in restoring the capacity of experiencing oneself as both a subject and an object, moving back and forth between these two perspectives on the self and integrating them into the representational world (Aron, 1998, 2000; Auerbach, 1993; Auerbach &

Blatt, 1996; Bach, 1994). The risk, however, is to make out of narcissism a cognitive issue, reducing it to egocentrism (Piaget, 1954; Werner, 1940), and conveying the idea that we are dealing with phenomena that can be controlled, modified, and intellectually overcome.

The basic difficulty of the new developmental perspective has to do with our understanding of the lack of boundaries. We accept that narcissism consists in the absence of boundaries, but we tend to approach such a condition in a negative way, assuming the perspective of what is lacking and focusing on the absence of a more articulated organization. Thus, in order to understand what is less developed, we rely on our knowledge of what is more developed, making the mistake that has been sharply questioned by the philosopher and psychologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962): that our reading of the subjective states is conditioned by an “intellectual” prejudice. In this paper, I will try to neutralize such a prejudice in order to gain access to the narcissistic lack of boundaries that is not conditioned by our pre-existing knowledge of the objective world. The notion of a disembodied gaze or anonymous eye will serve this purpose. I will discuss this notion first from a psychopathological prospective, collecting everyday life examples, primitive beliefs, and clinical vignettes, and then from a

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developmental perspective, reviewing Lacan's reading of the mirror stage.

The study of the disembodied gaze as a way to explore narcissism

Freud's main mistake consisted in assuming that desire could be inside-oriented, qualifying narcissism as a state of self-satisfied plenitude. He missed the eccentricity of desire and the extreme vulnerability that characterizes narcissism both as a developmental stage (the stage that accompanies the emergence of the ego) and as a pathological state. Nevertheless, Freud's definition of narcissism as the libidinal investment of the ego has the advantage of escaping an intellectual understanding of the ego as a product of the distinction between subject and object. The assumption that the ego is construed on "libido," that is, on forces that cannot be reduced to the interplay of representations and reflections, avoids the complete assimilation of narcissism to egocentrism.

In my opinion, we should not be afraid to keep in our vocabulary the notion of libido, in spite of its unclear theoretical status (Holt, 1989), once we give up the traditional metapsychological claim and accept it as a notion close to the level of experience, as a vitalistic notion. Long ago, Paul Federn (1926/1952, 1927/1952, 1929/1952) embraced this view, when he tried to bridge the Freudian concept of narcissism and the phenomenological perspective of psychiatrists such as Schilder and philosophers such as Husserl (Federn, 1927/1952) by means of the notion of "Ich-Gefühl" – a notion that I will translate here as "the feeling of myself."

According to Paul Federn, the "feeling of myself" was the way in which the narcissistic cathexis was *subjectively experienced*. Within his theory, the impairment of this feeling corresponded to a loss of libidinal cathexis of the corporal ego. As Heinz Kohut would later point out, the pathology of narcissism consisted not in an excess of libido, but in a *depletion of libido*. In this respect, the contributions of the two authors are quite similar. However, whereas Kohut described the collapse of the self in terms of fragmentation, Federn has focused more on the boundaries of the ego, opening a perspective that, in my opinion, enables us to further explore the fundamental role played by the gaze in psychic life.

If we assume that the feeling of the boundaries of our bodily ego plays an important part in our feelings of ourselves, we have to recognize that the division between inside and outside is intrinsic to such a feeling, and that when we feel ourselves we do it not only from the inside but also from the *outside*. Indeed, before knowing that we are visible, we *feel ourselves as visible*, that is, we experience ourselves as

the object of a gaze that is located outside us, independently from the fact that someone really is looking at us. We also feel ourselves seen when we are alone and nobody is looking at us. Besides being universal in childhood, this kind of experience re-emerges later on in life in situations of enhanced vulnerability and in many pathological states. The gaze is mainly experienced as located behind us, disembodied and anonymous, although it can sometimes be interpreted as the gaze of a known person (especially of the father) or, in case of autoscopy, as one's own gaze (in this rare and extreme case, I see myself from outside).

If we are usually not aware of such a feeling, it is because the lack of awareness is, in this case, a sign of psychic integration and adjustment. We slowly learn that we are located within ourselves, and only when we have forgotten how difficult such a learning process was does the anonymous gaze disappear. At the end of this process, we know that we are visible for ourselves and for the others, but, at the same time, we accept as a normal condition of life the fact of not being constantly at the centre of the scene, of being not so interesting for others, and with some relief we come to the conclusion that others are usually not looking at us. When we further learn that people are sometimes not really looking at us even when their eyes are meeting our physical bodies, we have finally overcome the developmental stage of narcissism.

Yet, just as our boundaries have to be constantly re-created, this achievement is not so stable. Certainly, it



Figure 1. "The body looking and being looked at", 2009, canvas, 150 × 100 cm, by Carlo Bonomi.

does not last for ever. Regression is easy. If a trauma disrupts our boundaries, the anonymous eye is released and we begin to feel ourselves looked at even when nobody is actually looking at us. Indeed, in order to re-live this kind of experience, we do not need a trauma: a strong fear or desire, an excess of fatigue, stress, and frustration, any intense emotional state – or just a poetic mood – can release the anonymous eye. We come to the following tentative conclusion: that the unbound anonymous eye that precedes or accompanies the construction of the ego structure is again set free when the ego boundaries become labile. If this conclusion is correct, the relationship between the unbound anonymous eye and the ego boundaries is an inverse one. Since we already know that the construction of our visibility is part of the ongoing organization of the ego structure, we may further speculate that the binding of this disembodied gaze or anonymous eye is part of the construction of our visibility.

If this hypothesis is correct, the focus on the experience of the not-yet-objectified gaze, of the only half-localized eye, represents a new access to the narcissistic lack of boundaries.

The power of the disembodied gaze

Let us begin our survey with some very simple clinical vignettes. In the course of an analysis, it is not at all rare to revive the disembodied gaze in association with the person of the analyst. A rather typical consequence of this association is that the patient feels everywhere the presence of the analyst's gaze. A patient of mine, a young woman who was a foreigner in Florence, used to walk in my part of town fantasizing that she would meet me on the street. Although the expectation that I was somewhere nearby was a fantasy, the feeling that I was looking at her was *a real and intense sensorial experience*, permeated by desire and dread. Reflecting on the meaning of such an experience, we came to understand that she needed it in order to enhance her own visibility and restore a lively feeling of herself. Her exposure to the gaze was used to contrast her feeling of becoming invisible and fading away in the crowds of an unfamiliar town. By enhancing her own visibility, she was recharging her depleted batteries. In this case, the exposure served to produce and to absorb narcissistic libido.

The drive to exhibit oneself probably has the same roots. Kohut (1971, p. 117) traces it back to “the gleam in the mother's eye” that mirrors the child's bodily display. In general, we can say that our sense of being is enhanced when we experience ourselves as visible. Yet our visibility can also be a source of discomfort, anguish, and shame. Since in the current

psychoanalytic literature the examples of benevolent (or “mirroring”) gaze are manifold, while those of malignant gaze are underrepresented, I will now turn to the latter.

The malignant side of the gaze can be illustrated by referring to the dream of another patient. She is in a car with her father. She sits in the back, while her father, who is driving, looks at her through the car's mirror. In the mirror, only the upper part of her body is reflected. Immediately after the dream, the patient began to wear dark glasses.

The patient was also a young woman living alone in a unfamiliar town, a condition that increased her sense of insecurity and shame. She was initially developing an agoraphobia, but as soon as she realized that the anxiety of crossing a square was caused by the sensation of having the crowd's eyes over her, the symptom disappeared. Shortly after, it reappeared in the form of a claustrophobia, but this time too the symptom disappeared as soon as she traced it back to the experience of being looked at in a moment when she could not escape. When she became more aware of her feelings of shame, she admitted that she was very ashamed of her legs: she never wore a skirt because they were misshapen. However, as soon as she verbalized such a belief, she realized that nothing was indeed wrong with her legs and that the source of her discomfort was the simple fact of being visible. At this point, she had the dream that I have just referred, and immediately afterward she began to wear dark glasses, using them as a shelter. Thanks to the dark glasses, she was now feeling safe because the people's eyes could not reach her.

Let us examine this apparently irrational behavior. The use of dark glasses as a shelter seems to derive from the infantile belief that, in order to become invisible, it is sufficient to cover one's eyes. According to academic psychology, such a belief is rooted in the lack of consciousness of the body as seen from outside, which characterizes the egocentrism of the child. However, this explanation is an intellectual one, in the aforementioned sense, as it makes use of objective knowledge. I suggest instead that the gaze is originally experienced as *a disembodied force* that radiates from the eyes, as is also hinted at by the drawings of the human body made by very young children. In these drawings, the eyes are located outside the head not because of a cognitive mistake, but because they are experienced as if they were “jumping out” the head (compare this with Merleau-Ponty's reading of the theory of infantile drawings by Luquet in Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1973).

Children are, in this regard, in good company as, according to the ancient Greek thinkers, including the Pythagoreans, if the eyes can see, it is because

they emanate rays of lights produced by an internal fire. Moreover, in very ancient (Aeolic) Greek, the expressions “to look at” and “to blow within” were identical (Onians, 1954), as if what is projected by the breath and introjected by the eyes has the same substance (the soul). More in general, it is known that “in antiquity, gazing was the physical method by which the bad influence passed from one person to another” (Ulmer, 1994, p. VII). This special sensitivity is preserved in the widespread metaphor of the eyes as “the window of the soul.”

Among contemporary thinkers, the power of the eyes has been especially emphasized by Jean Paul Sartre (1943), who related the experience of the body to the existential condition of being visible, and in this way to the danger of being transformed into an object by the gaze of the other. The concern for objectification has been transferred from phenomenology to psychoanalysis by authors who have described shame as a sudden collapse of the self provoked by the gaze of the other (e.g. Battacchi, 2002; Broucek, 1991; Goldberg, 1991; Lewis, 1992).

Let us further explore the nature of the threat. If we assume that the gaze is originally experienced as a disembodied force that can dangerously penetrate into the mind, we can also understand that, by wearing dark glasses, my patient was trying *to create a barrier and stop these rays*. More precisely, she was strengthening the sheltering function that is normally performed by the body when the ego boundaries are well established. We usually feel protected by our body. This means that the body performs the sheltering function in a natural and silent way, and that we become aware of this function only when it is lacking. Shame is the signal of the failure of this ordinary sheltering function: when we feel ashamed, we wish to hide ourselves behind or inside our body.

In certain conditions of enhanced vulnerability, especially when the boundaries are not sufficiently established (we might also say when the external body is not sufficiently cathected with narcissistic libido), the sheltering function of the body decreases to the point that we become transparent, that is, our thoughts and feelings become dangerously exposed to the mind of the others. In primitive societies, such a dangerous situation is described as the risk of losing the soul.

The risk of losing the soul accompanies our life, as is well illustrated by the following anecdote narrated by Jan Stensson – the eminent founder of our journal – commenting an earlier version of this paper (Bonomi, 2008). My description of the sheltering function of the colour black made a lost memory of his school days resurface in him. He was at home, sitting in front of a book that belonged to a classmate with whom he

was secretly in love, when his father entered the room. He got upset and confused, and reacted by spilling his bottle of ink all over the book. The meaning of such a clumsy action, which put to an end his first hopes of love, remained obscure to him, but now – 65 years later! – everything became clear. When his father came in, his fantasies of love were filling the space, and his most intimate thoughts and feelings were all around him, as visible as real things can be. At the same time, they were too fragile to resist the clash with his father’s powerful gaze. Like the dark glasses in the previous example, the spilling of the black ink was an attempt to hide the exposed soul, restoring a shelter and re-establishing a physical border between the minds.

Looking for shelters

These examples suggest a close connection between the manifold strategies aimed at creating some form of efficient shelter and the ongoing building of the ego structure. Such a connection explains the inverse relationship between the disembodied gaze and the boundaries of the bodily ego: the establishment of boundaries provides a stable shelter.

If boundaries are shelters, we have to acknowledge that the construction of the ego is pervaded by magic. The use of magic in the creation of shelters is easy to understand and accept – although we do not dare to take into serious consideration the consequences: the possibility that these shelters are also the bricks that served to build our ego. I am saying here that – perhaps – the process by which the boundaries of the ego are created does not basically differ from what occurs in an obsessive neurosis, with its typical sequel of phobic and counterphobic actions.

Let us try to understand why we need shelters. Our visibility is dangerous because, in certain situations, when our vulnerability is enhanced, we experience visibility as a threat to the core of our being. What is subjectively felt is that we would not survive if our most intimate desires, hopes, and emotions were to be made visible.

In order to protect our core being – our soul – we develop various strategies, most of which concern the body. We fill it with libido, we make it thick and real, and we put it forward, like a shield. Sometime we sacrifice a part of it, as with my patient who was ashamed of her legs. The supposed defect of her legs allowed her, in fact, to deviate the annihilating gaze to this external part of the body, preventing it from reaching a more intimate part of the self (and when this strategy failed, as was announced by her dream, she had to wear dark glasses). We can draw an analogy with war, when the enemy is invited to shoot fake targets; similarly, parts of our visible body can

be sacrificed in order to create a shelter for the soul. This shelter is similar to the “protective shield against stimuli” postulated by Freud (1920) in *Beyond the pleasure principle*, with the difference that the dangerous stimuli that are “killing the living substance” here are the rays of the disembodied gaze. We might therefore speak of a “protective shield against the gaze.”

It could also happen that the sheltering function performed by our visible body is broken through, and that an internal zone of the body becomes the new frontier of defense, as occurred with another patient of mine who, during her first years of analysis, was concerned only with her internal organs. Apparently, her concern with the integrity and vitality of her organs had a good reason, as she was under treatment to increase her fertility. However, by undergoing continuous gynecological inspections, she exposed herself to an eye that penetrated her body, repeating the awkward experience of being scrutinized by her mother during puberty, when she had to stand ashamed and humiliated at the door of her home while her mother was silently looking at her. During these “inspections,” she felt her mother’s gaze entering her vagina in search of traces of sexual activity. Recalling this memory, she realized that her mother’s “evil eye” – as she called it – had since then remained in her body, casting a spell on her.

The evil eye

The “evil eye” is the most diffused version of the disembodied gaze. According to anthropologists, the belief in the evil eye is universal. It consists of an *emanation of evil power from the eye*, which results in sterility, disease, and death (Bohigian, 1997; Maloney, 1976; Ulmer, 1994; see also the item “Evil eye” in Wikipedia and, related to the psychoanalytic literature, see, among others, Fenichel, 1935/1953; Riess, 1988; Tournay & Plazak, 1954).

The basis for such a belief is our special sensitivity to the eyes as a communication channel from one person to another, and the concept merely “exaggerates the impact of any visual interest or gazing” (Ulmer, 1994, p. VII). The common saying “If looks could kill” well epitomizes the primordial fear of the magic power of the eye. The belief is therefore especially apt to shed light on the phenomena we are exploring. For instance, we find preserved in this belief the primitive experience of the gaze as “a power radiating from the eyes” (Ulmer, 1994, p. 4), which we have utilized to explain the use of dark glasses as a shelter that attenuates dangerous eye contact. The power that radiates from the eyes calls for the construction of a system of borders and boundaries.

It can therefore be assumed as a force that, from early infancy onwards, motivates the building of the ego structure as a system that stabilizes the distinction between subject and object.

Significantly, the most common protective devices have been talismans and amulets worn on the body, and protective coverings on the head and arms – which means that fashionwear is not an additional but an essential part of the construction of the ego (significantly, children and primitive societies tend to consider clothes as an essential part of their identity; cf. Werner, 1940). The traditional idea that shame is the reason why we cover our nudity is not far from this situation, since the feeling of shame is based on the experience of being exposed to others’ gaze. The original reason for dressing up is no different from the reason for wearing dark glasses: it reflects our need for shelter. Before the introduction of clothing, the body was even then not left naked. In primitive societies, the body was covered with drawings that had the same function as clothes: they were protective shelters.

One could object and say here that body paintings do not offer a protection from the eyes, since the impressive forms and colors have been chosen precisely to attract the gaze. This objection enables us to go deeper into the phenomenon. We can compare the attractive qualities of body paintings (and later on of fashionable dresses) to those of jewelry. Jewels were originally amulets and ornaments that attracted the gaze, operating as a protective device against the evil eye precisely by attracting the gaze, creating a fake target. For instance, certain amulets called *totafo* were worn between a woman’s eyes in order to attract the first glance of a wicked person (Ulmer, 1994, p. 162). The interesting aspect of this tradition is that it reveals the infinite reversibility between causes and effects that characterizes the magic world of the disembodied eye. In fact, if the spot between a woman’s eyes has to be protected with a jewel (or with a third faked eye), it is because of the well-known power of the female eyes to charm. We are beginning to glimpse the deeper connection between narcissism and the emergence of the ego. The developmental task of differentiating between subject and object passes through the magic process of gaining control over our visibility.

Let us try to inspect the mechanism further by reconsidering the primitive use of body paintings. We can now realize that the same elements which, by attracting the gaze, are used as shelters, are also apt to produce a new kind of visibility, which is culturally determined. Once the gaze, or better the force of the gaze, is captured, it can be used to achieve a new goal, such as the building of a social and personal identity (forms and colors can identify a clan, the

position of the individual in the clan, and so on). This is what I mean by “binding” the gaze. The sheltering function is necessary but not sufficient. The brutal force of the gaze that is absorbed by the shelter has to be reutilized in the construction of an organized world. Ultimately, the binding of the disembodied gaze consists in the ongoing transformation of the brutal force of the gaze into meaning.

Let us now briefly turn back to the patient who had incorporated her mother’s evil eye. Her analysis was slow and demanding. I cannot here illustrate its many levels and implications, but I can refer to an episode whose meaning resonates with present considerations. It took place during the sixth year of analysis, at a period when we finally felt sufficiently safe in our relationship.

One day, the patient asked for permission to cancel a session because she had to go to the beautician. I agreed with her request without going more deeply in the matter. I even forgot the reason for her request. However, in the next session I made an interpretation based on the analogy between the analyst and the beautician – without recalling that she really had gone to the beautician, and without being aware of the real substitution. The patient at this point disclosed her feelings about the situation. She said that her initial expectation was that I would have not accepted her canceling a session for such a futile reason, but now she was realizing how important it was to her that I did not object. It was the first time she had taken care of her exterior beauty, and she felt ashamed. But after canceling the session, she began to think that the reason could not be so futile after all if I valued her “charm” more than a session. In short, for the first time in her life, she experienced the reassuring feeling that to be charming was not something bad, forbidden, or impossible.

For many years, we had struggled with her sensation of being transparent. Everything was so “deep” and “serious” that she could not avoid being continuously hurt. Now we had finally gained a surface where we could be occupied with “superficial” things, which, however, increased the libidinal cathexis of her corporal ego, strengthened the sheltering function of her body (which is why it was important that I did not enquire into the reasons for her request), and facilitated her gaining control over her visibility.

The eye, the phallus, and the *fascinum*

Plutarch explained the phenomenon of the evil eye by referring to the eyes as the source of deadly rays. Strangely enough, the awful power of the eyes has been rarely taken into account within psychoanalysis. Whereas the positive side of the look has been

strongly emphasized – for instance the mother’s admiring look that, according to Kohut, rescues the collapsing self of the baby by inflating grandiosity within it – the negative side of the look has so far not been stressed enough, in spite of the fact that neutralization of the “deadly rays” plays a fundamental role in building the ego structure.

In ancient times, the most common defense against the evil eye was a representation of an erect penis. If we leave psychoanalytic common wisdom aside, the association between the eye and the phallus might appear obscure. In order to understand it, we have to consider that both have the power to hypnotize. Thanks to its charm, the phallus was perceived to be *as powerful as the eye*, and therefore it could be used to resist (as a jewel on the forehead) the power of the gaze. In ancient Rome, the phallus-shaped amulet used to ward off the evil eye was called a *fascinum*. Besides representing a clue of the hypnotizing effect of the phallus, the name reveals charm, *fascination* as the battlefield between Eros and Thanatos. The magic phallus is in fact supposed to neutralize the impending death by *fascinating* the disembodied gaze, that is, by binding it (from the Latin verb *fascio*, *fasciare*, to bind). Here we have reached the origins of exhibitionism. At the root of exhibitionism, there is a struggle with the unbound, life-threatening gaze, and what is exhibited is always a *phallus*, being used to bind the awful look.

Let us turn to some examples. A young woman could not stand to be looked at when she did not feel well. If she had to go in the street, she tried to avoid people, she was afraid to be recognized, and her sole desire was to disappear, to become invisible. In order to decrease her visibility, she dressed very badly and lowered her eyes. When she was at home, she kept the windows closed or walked near the walls. In brief, she was trying to minimize her exposure to a persecuting gaze. Yet, like ancient Romans, this woman had her own *fascinum*, her own way to dispel the free-floating persecuting gaze. It consisted in exhibiting her naked body to someone in order to charm him. Her behavior was not driven by a sexual desire: her joy, her “*juissance*,” consisted in monitoring the magic effects of her naked body on the enchanted partner. The hypnotizing phallus was, in this case, her naked body. Another patient, who was very shy and ashamed, underwent an impressive transformation when she became pregnant. Her usual uneasiness disappeared, and being visible, instead of being a torture, became a source of pleasure. The magic phallus was here the child.

Another patient, a mature woman, had a recurrent dream: looking at herself in the mirror, she regularly found a phallus attached to her slim body. This

woman did not have a real interest in a sexual life, but she had the need to be looked at by men. At the same time, she was so vulnerable and sensitive to gaze of others that she could satisfy her need only when she was accompanied by a more attractive woman, a sort of cruising twin or double who could take on herself the perilous element of the gaze. This enchanting double, worn like a jewel, was her *fascinum*, once again in the sense of her phallus.

Exhibitionism (the need to bind the awful look by means of fascination) as well as its opposite, the desire to disappear, can be considered to be strategies aimed at compensating for a faulty or incomplete acquisition of a mature visibility. Let us now turn to the developmental task of reaching a stable and integrated visibility.

Becoming visible

In his revision of the theory, Heinz Kohut (1971, p. 26) pointed out that narcissism was less a matter of the orientation of the drives than of the quality of the cathexis, suggesting that objects were cathected with narcissistic libido when they were “used in the service of the Self” or “experienced as part of the Self.” As is well known, he proposed for these objects the name “self-objects” – a qualification which, however, misses their visual function. (Here Kohut neglects his own famous remark: “The most significant relevant basic interactions between mother and child lie usually in the visual area”; Kohut, 1971, p. 117.) We can better understand this visual function by considering that narcissism, as a developmental stage, is first of all aimed at achieving a *mastered visibility*, that is, as I am trying to show in this article, at binding the disembodied gaze.

This process is, in my opinion, implicated in the *mirror stage* postulated by Jacques Lacan (1949/1977) and reformulated by Merleau-Ponty (1949/1964) within the frame of a famous lesson on the child’s relations to others that was held shortly after the publication of Lacan’s article. In the latter, the infant’s playful interest in the mirror image between 8 and 18 months of age was assumed by Lacan to be paradigmatic of the fictitious structuration of the ego, since it illustrates the precise moment when the “I” is precipitated for the first time as an imago. The infant is fascinated by the discovery that he is visible to himself as well as to others. He realizes that he can make of himself a spectacle, or better still, that he *is* such a spectacle.

The play with the mirror image signals the onset of narcissism, the structural function of which is explained by Lacan in terms of a passage from the primal introceptive me to the visible me or “specular I.” The *exterior visual image* offers to the infant the

possibility of escaping the internal sense of himself as a fragmented and chaotic jumble of sensations, enabling a new perception of himself as an unified whole. The visual image, the *Gestalt*, thus performs the functions of *alienation* from a premature interiority and of *captivation* in an exterior space, in which the encounter with the other is foreshadowed. As Merleau-Ponty (1949/1964, p. 136) puts it:

I leave the reality of my lived *me* in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal, fictitious or imaginary *me*, of which the specular image is the first outline. In this sense I am torn from myself, and the image in the mirror prepares me for another still more serious alienation, which will be the alienation by others. For others have only an exterior image of me, which is analogous to the one seen in the mirror. Consequently others will tear me away from my immediate inwardness much more surely than will the mirror.

Whereas the description of the dialectic of *alienation* and *captivation* is convincing, the experience of surprise and jubilation on the part of the infant is not sufficiently explained by referring it to the overcoming of the fragmented jumble of inner sensations, especially because the differentiation between inside and outside, and between introceptive and visual data, is not yet set. In my opinion, it could be better explained by assuming that recognition of the image represents a sort of triumph over the disembodied eye.

Lacan’s reading was conditioned by the analysis by Wallon (1934), who was the first to study the infant’s play with the specular image. Wallon, noting that the specular image of the other was acknowledged by the infant long before his own image, tried to solve the discrepancy in the following way: recognition of the image of the other is easier because the infant has in his visual field both sets of data and can compare them. On the contrary, when the child is in front of an image of himself, he is dealing with two different sets of data whose coordination is a more difficult task: the introceptive sensation, which is here, and the visual image, which is there. Thus, he has first to understand that the mirror image is not himself, because he is “here” (where he feels himself) and not “there” (where he sees himself). Second, he has to understand that he can nonetheless be seen by an external witness at the place at which he feels himself. In short, he must first reduce the image to a simple appearance and then displace the mirror image, bringing it back to himself. If the task is more difficult, it is because it requires the intellectual constitution of a superior type of space, which is rather distant from the immediate experience, since it is based on the assumption that different places can be an identical place.

The relevance of this spatial “objectivation” becomes clearer when we consider its function with respect to *ubiquity*. The constitution of the objective space enables the overcoming of the primal ubiquity. The question is touched on by Wallon when he says that the child begins by seeing the specular image as a sort of *double* of the real body. He even admits, as stressed by Merleau-Ponty (1949/1964, p. 131), that this was *the real source of his pleasure*:

If the child plays with his own image in the mirror, says Wallon, it is because he is amusing himself by finding in the mirror a reflection which has all the appearances of an animated being and yet is not one. Here it would be a question of “animistic games,” an activity which proclaims that animistic *beliefs* have been suppressed. But why should it be so amusing somehow to verify the animistic appearance if there remained in the subject no traces of this amazing phenomenon which on first encounter so fascinated the child – namely the presence of a quasi intention in the reflection?

According to Merleau-Ponty, the intellectual explanation offered by Wallon was not entirely convincing. If the problem faced by the child were merely cognitive, children would not spend their time in this type of animistic game with the mirror, since once achieved a cognitive solution is achieved for ever. But children love to repeat these games, and even in adults the fascination with mirror is far from over. This means that something else is at stake.

Merleau-Ponty quoted Lacan’s reading of the mirror stage at this point of his lesson, in order to point out that the synthesis required by the mirror stage was not an intellectual one, but rather a “synthesis of coexistence with others” (Merleau-Ponty, 1949/1964, p. 140). Lacan’s idea, brilliantly exposed, served to prove that the acquisition of the mirror image involved the entire structure of our relations with the world and with the others. Yet Merleau-Ponty did not consider this the final word on the subject.²

Merleau-Ponty in fact rejects the premise of Lacan’s reading, the distinction between what is furnished by introception and what comes from external perception³, since it is the later visual consciousness of the body that enables the infant to separate “what *he* lives from what *others* live” (1949/

1964, p. 135). Moreover, after the exposition of Lacan, Merleau-Ponty comes back to Wallon’s “animistic” remark and to the question of primal ubiquity, as if Lacan’s reading of the mirror stage did not represent an adequate solution to these problems. Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty (1949/1964, p. 138), the duplication originally experienced through the mirror image is never completely overcome:

Childhood is never radically liquidated; we never completely eliminate the corporeal condition that gives us, in the presence of a mirror, the impression of finding in it something of ourselves. This magic belief, which at first gives the specular image the value not of a simple reflection, of an ‘image’ in the proper sense, but rather of a ‘double’ of oneself – this belief never totally disappears. It re-forms itself in the emotional make up of the adult.

The phenomenon of the primal ubiquity pointed out by Merleau-Ponty is also implicated in the experience of being the object of a gaze that is located outside us, one that occurs when nobody is looking at us. It seems to me that the animistic games to which Wallon refers have to do with achieving a control over this feeling, which is closely connected to ubiquity. Merleau-Ponty explicitly associates ubiquity with “autoscopy”.⁴ If we acquire the capacity to *reduce the gaze to the eye*, and to locate the latter in the body, it is because of the same spatial reorganization that enables us to overcome the primal ubiquity. Yet the physical-geometrical objectivation of the space is never complete; it is resisted, for instance, by what Heinz Werner (1940) has defined as “physiognomic perception.” The latter preserves in fact the original experience in form of emotions.

The emotions elicited by the mirror can be further analysed. If we assume that the “*presence of a quasi intention in the reflection*,” which, according to Merleau-Ponty, fascinates the child, corresponds to “the gleam in the mother’s eye” found by Kohut at the origins of the drive to exhibit oneself, we could consider the animistic games in front of the mirror to be both an evocation of the disembodied eye and an exercise to control it.

In my opinion, Winnicott (1967) came to a similar conclusion when, reading Lacan’s paper “Le Stade du Miroir,” he saw in the mirror the mother’s face. Although he presented the mother’s face as a *precursor*

² As pointed out by Lewis Kirshner [1991, p. 175], Lacan’s early formulation of the narcissistic origins of the ego is solipsistic and misses “the Hegelian resonance of Winnicott’s mirror phase, which builds on the principle of intersubjective recognition.” Whereas the subject is seen by Lacan as being trapped in its isolation, Merleau-Ponty reverses the sense of Lacan’s analysis.

³ “There is no distinction between the data of what the learned adult calls introceptivity and the data of sight” (Merleau-Ponty, 1949/1964, p. 133).

⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1949/1964, p. 129) points out that many pathological facts (which occur in dreams, in dying people, in certain hypnotic states, and in drowning people) bear witness to this kind of external perception of the self, this “autoscopy.” “What reappears in these pathological states, and in drowning people, is comparable to the child’s original consciousness of his own visible body in the mirror. ‘Primitive’ people are capable of believing that the same person is in several places at the same time. This possibility of ubiquity, difficult for us to understand, can be illuminated by the initial forms of the specular image.”

in emotional development, he was giving a complex interpretation of the persisting tendency to experience the mirror image as a “double” (Wallon) or to feel in it the “*presence of a quasi intention*” (Merleau-Ponty). He explicitly address this kind of feeling when he writes, “when the average girl studies her face in the mirror she is reassuring herself that the mother-image is there and that the mother can see her and that the mother is *en rapport* with her” (Winnicott, 1967, p. 113). The “glimpse” (p. 116) that the child sees in the depth of the mirror epitomizes an entire sequel of reflections. The objectivation of the space has not got the power to dispel the primal ubiquity; the latter is rather condensed into a living poetry.

Narcissism as ongoing construction of a mastered visibility

The matrix of this living poetry – which Winnicott tries to put in words writing the famous quotation “When I look I am seen, so I exist . . .” – is the original ubiquity of a condensed gaze that forms the living “synthesis of coexistence with others.” The stage of the mirror is only a moment of this ongoing synthesis in which the diaphragm between me and the other slowly emerges as a counterpart of the visual consciousness of my own body.

According to Merleau-Ponty, a more difficult test is the crisis of the third year, when the gaze of the other begins to elicit discomfort and embarrassment. Until that moment, being looked at was experienced by the child as encouragement, but now the same situation can result in inhibition. Because of a new sensitivity, the child under observation can lose his concentration and interrupt his action. This extreme sensitivity to the gaze can even be the source of clumsiness. It is the onset of the fear of being looked at that accompanies the end of the indistinction between me and the other. The break in the communion between subject and object modifies the experience of looking and of being looked: the previous oneness is broken and now, when I am the object of the gaze of the other, I feel separated and isolated.

The crisis of the third year is the crisis of the momentous triumph on the disembodied eye enjoyed by means of a cognitive acquisition of the specular image, that is, through the playful discovery that we are in control of our visibility. It can be described as an “attack” on the self performed by the disembodied gaze. Such an attack threatens our being in a dramatic way and can leave permanent scars.

I do not know if there are empirical studies on the behaviour of the child in front of the mirror during or after this crisis, but I imagine that the child’s experience cannot remain the same as before. In

Lacan’s jargon, the new structuration corresponds to the passage from the “imaginary” to the “symbolic” order. Anticipating this articulation, Merleau-Ponty (1949/1964, p. 136) says that the captivation by “the image in the mirror” will be followed by “another still more serious alienation, which will be the alienation by others.” The ego that would emerge from the crisis is in fact an ego seen by the others. Its visibility depends on representations controlled by the others. The difficulty in dealing with these representations explains the new regressive call of the specular image.

If the mirror becomes seducing and reassuring, as in the myth of Narcissus, it is because it permits us to regain some control over our visibility. Since the cognitive acquisition of the specular image consisted in the passage from ubiquity to identity, the same specular image can be later used regressively as a remedy for the ubiquity generated in us by the others. Moreover, since it is mainly through language that we are confronted with the manifold views that others have of us, this regression is also a formal one, from language to image. Last but not least, mirrors permit a regression to the restoring “gleam in the mother’s eye” (Kohut) and reassuring oneness with the mother-image (Winnicott). This regression also represents an effort to bind the disembodied gaze that is threatening the self, by giving a body to it and by fixing it to an image. Narcissism is the effort to bind an almighty free-floating gaze.

If and when this goal is reached, we are ready for a further reorganization of our visibility based on prospectivism, that is, on an ongoing acknowledgment of the partiality of the gaze. The discovery that our most intimate desires, thoughts, and emotions will not be crushed by the gaze embodied in the other is a crucial moment of this dialectical process. It also represents the main entrance door to a mature interiority.

Beyond awe: A brief remark on the new visibility enabled by the Internet

I am tempted to conclude by remarking that in today’s world there is emerging a new kind of visibility that interferes with the function that I have assigned to narcissism, and therefore with the possibility of binding anguish and stabilizing persecution. This new visibility is enabled by Internet – I am here referring to the virtual spaces such as MySpace, Facebook, Second Life, and so on – and is characterized by the fact that the self-exposure to the unbound, free-floating gaze is no longer experienced as a danger.

Within the virtual space, the disembodied gaze has been liberated from its awe; the evil eye has been

dispelled; shame has been suspended; our desires, hopes, and emotions do not risk destruction; we do not need shelters; fascination is no longer the battlefield between Eros and Thanatos; narcissism is no longer necessary and therefore it cannot be overcome. Ultimately, the dialectal difference between exteriority and interiority, on which the modern construction of the self is based, seems to be fading away. I have the impression that this kind of unbounded visibility, which ignores separation, is liable to reverse its value at any moment, giving rise to postmodern witch trials and persecutions.

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