

## The Mirror Stage

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### *Part 1*

The mirror stage paper from 1949 is probably one of the most familiar of Lacan's writings in the English speaking world. Appearing, along with a "companion" paper on aggressivity in 1977, in a translation of a selection of *Ecrits*, it was considered more approachable than the other writings. Perhaps because it was easy to misapprehend as something familiar and understandable: it is often mistaken for the description of a developmental stage based on observable phenomena. However, Lacan had something else entirely in mind when he crafted the mirror stage, something that he continued to refer to and to modify. References to his concept of the mirror stage crop up through a number of papers and seminars, the last reference that I could find occurring in Seminar *R.S.I.*, in 1975, nearly 40 years after the first presentation of his Mirror Stage in 1936.

The history of the concept of "The Mirror Stage" begins with a missed encounter. Lacan first delivered a paper entitled "The Mirror Stage," or "The Looking-glass Stage" as the title was then translated, at the 1936 Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association. However, his presentation was interrupted after ten minutes by the chair of the meeting, Ernest Jones, Lacan's allotted time having apparently run out. This original version of the paper no longer exists, Lacan apparently "forgot" to submit it for publication in the papers of the Congress, and then subsequently

mislaid it. It was not mentioned in Ernest Jones's brief account of the congress, perhaps due to the fact that, at least in Elizabeth Rudinesco's account, after being interrupted, Lacan "vented his rancor to the Welshman." All that remains of that initial talk are some notes taken by Francois Dolto, and some subsequent questions for later clarification posed to Lacan by the French group.

In 1938, at the invitation of Henri Wallon, Lacan published an article entitled "*La famille*" in the *Encyclopédie française* that contained a section entitled "the Mirror Stage," presumably close in content to the 1936 paper. In the article *La famille* the presentation of the concept of the mirror stage is preceded by an examination of aggressivity. It's worthwhile to briefly look at this segment of Lacan's argument since it is what leads him to his concept of the mirror stage. It sets the stage, so to speak.

In his discussion of aggressivity, Lacan asserts that jealousy of a sibling signifies an identification with the state of the rival. He also states that the sado-masochistic libidinal tendencies that dominate the weaning stage, in being both passive and active, as well signify an identification with the "other who is the object of violence." (Lacan, 1938, p. 13) Noting that masochism proposed an enigma for psychoanalysis, and led Freud to postulate the existence of the death drive, Lacan designates "the miseries of human weaning as the source of the desire for death,"(p.14) and recalls Freud's observations of the game of *Fort-da*, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, stating that the game reproduces the misery of weaning, allowing for sublimating and overcoming it.

This division of the subject — divided by the loss of the breast — is "completed through identification with the sibling, because it provides the image which fixes one of the poles of primary masochism."(p.14) Lacan compares the *fort-da* game to a

“primordial form of suicide” that engenders the “imaginary murder of the sibling.” He notes that the “violence” of the imaginary murder of the sibling, as enacted in the *fort-da* game is not a true “struggle for life,” “[t]he object that aggressivity chooses for its primitive death games is in fact some toy or scrap which is biologically indifferent. The subject does away with it gratuitously as if for the sheer pleasure of it and thus brings to completion the loss of the maternal object.”(p. 14) In this analysis of the *Fort-da* game, Lacan sees enacted a sado-masochistic identification with the rival, as well as a working through of the loss of the maternal object.

However, the term identification, utilized in relation to the *fort-da* game, is ill defined as far as Lacan is concerned, and is what leads him to his discussion of the Mirror Stage in order to bring some clarification to the question of identifications.

Lacan notes that an important condition for the significance of the mirror stage is the prematurity of the human infant, which signifies a “double rupture” in his view: the first rupture is with that of the animal connaturality that is defined by an immediate adaptation to the milieu, and a second rupture is that of the “unity of functioning of the living being that for the animal world places perception at the service of the drives.” (p.6)

Depending upon their “level of intelligence and sociability” most living creatures perceive the form of fellow creatures as a “mental unity,” however, Lacan asserts, humans demonstrate a relation to the image at a “second power” in which the image stands in contrast to the prematurity of the human infant. (p.14)

The discordance of this prematurity presents for the human infant not only a sense of a fragmented body, so that the image is invested with a psychic interest “aiming at a certain restitution of the body,”(p. 15) but also reality itself, initially subjected

to a perceptual fragmentation, is organized as a reflection of the form of the body. This form providing a model for all objects.

The subject discovers his unity, and the unity of objects in the world, through the image — be it his own image in the mirror, or the image of the small other — in which he represents his identity to himself. “What the subject welcomes [in the mirror image] is the mental unity inherent to it. What he recognizes in it is the ideal of the imago of the double. What he acclaims in it is the triumph of a salutary tendency.”(p. 15)

The image intrudes into the discordant world of the infant, an intrusion that Lacan calls a narcissistic intrusion in that the unity that it introduces will contribute to the formation of the ego. “However, before the ego affirms its own identity it confuses itself with this image which forms it, but also subjects it to a primordial alienation.” The ego will retain from its origin this structure derived from the specular relation which can be observed in tendencies of seduction and parade, and which, Lacan asserts, “gives their form to the sado-masochistic and scopophilic drives [...], which are essentially destructive of the other.” (p. 35)

In his 1938 paper, Lacan formulates the mirror stage as preceding the Oedipus complex, correlating the origins of the ego with a narcissistic investment of the specular image, the “image of the double,” that establishes an initial relation to the world in which there are no others, since the image of the other is not distinguished from himself. This position is modified in the passage through the Oedipus Complex, which defines the psychical relations in the human family, introducing the question of a third into the closed duality of the relation with the image.



In 1949 Lacan delivered a paper on the Mirror Stage at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis, which in 1966 was published in *Ecrits*. As Lacan noted in the introduction to his paper in 1949, in the intervening years since his attempt to introduce the mirror stage to the wider international psychoanalytic community, the concept of the mirror stage had become “more or less adopted” by the French group. This 1949 paper not only elaborates upon the 1938 segment from *la famille*, but also has some significant differences. In particular, Lacan distinguishes between the ego and the subject. In addition, Lacan makes clear that he considers the mirror stage a structural rather than a phenomenological stage: it is not to be inserted as a “step” within a “developmental” view of an individual.

In the paper from 1949, the full title of which is “The Mirror Stage as Formative Of the function of the *I* as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” Lacan was attempting to clarify the concept of narcissism in order to address some of the difficulties created by Freud’s second, or “structural” theory. The human subject’s relation to the *semblant*, the small other, and to his own image offered Lacan a way to conceptualize the formation of the ego as essential for understanding the subject not as a discrete “individual,” but as a socially elaborated subject.

For Lacan, the ego was simply the sum of the identifications made possible through the mirror stage, and was to be strictly differentiated from the subject. (Which Lacan in this paper seems to be referring to as the “I,” a term that he subsequently dropped.)

In fact, before tackling Lacan’s arguments in this paper, I want to address his use of the function of the “*I*,” since his distinctions between the ego, the subject and the *I* are

difficult to follow. At one point Lacan even refers to the “ideal-I,” and then in a footnote added when the paper was published in *Écrits* he rather dryly notes “I have let stand the peculiar translation I adopted in this article for Freud’s *Ideal Ich*, without further comment except to say that I have not maintained it since.” (Lacan, 2006. p.76n).

However, despite his translation of *Ich* as *I* in this one instance, he is not merely substituting the “I” for the “ego,” since he also refers to the “ego” in this paper, not a lot, twice, but enough to make clear that it is not the “I.” Therefore, they are to be distinguished.

An important fact that is lost in the translation of the paper is that the French term for the ego is “*moi*,” or “me.” However, if Lacan is indicating an opposition in the pair “I” and “me,” which can be opposed grammatically as subject and object, we should be very careful not to imagine that the subject of the unconscious can be defined as the grammatical subject. They are not the same thing at all, since this would be to confuse the subject with subjectivity. As Lacan reminds us it is vital to “*décrotter le sujet du subjectif*” — scrape subjectivity off of the subject. (Lacan, 2001. p. 248)

“This error is to confuse the subject as a logical term and the grammatical ‘I’ and thus to suppress the topological space of their difference where unconscious desire flows. Desire is articulated logically, but is not articulable by an ‘I.’” (Porge, 2009. p.30)

The subject of the unconscious is revealed in the breaks, the gaps in which the “I” is confronted by an “it.”

“The subject has no subjectivity, it is not subjective, it is instituted in its destitution since it is only represented by a signifier for another signifier. There where there is a subject there is a fading of subjectivity. In this space-time between two signifiers, there

is foreclosure, sign of nothing, pure hypothesis. Supposed, it supposes nothing.” (p 29)  
If Lacan opposes the “I” to the “me” it is to designate a difference between the two, indicating a division of the subject.

The difficulties, beyond the obscurities produced by translation from French to English, in being able to distinguish the terms as Lacan employs them in this paper arise because the paper predates Lacan’s clarification in 1953 of the real, imaginary and symbolic registers, so he is struggling to distinguish them in this paper. For example he distinguishes between the specular *I* — which he would later be able to designate as imaginary and the social *I* - which he would later call *symbolic*. He links *Imagos* to both the specular image and to “the penumbra of symbolic effectiveness” while referring the reader to Levi-Strauss’ article *L’efficacité Symbolic* published that same year. (Lacan, 2006. p. 75n) Distinguishing the *I* from the *me* shows the effect of the symbolic order upon the imaginary, even if Lacan has yet to name them as such.

Much later, in his Seminar, *L’Objet de la Psychanalyse*, in 1966, Lacan will say of the “I”:

“The fragility of this foundational word is one of those that humans make use of in order to try to exist. It is something about which we can only begin to speak with some seriousness because we know that this announcing “I” is the one which is really divided, namely, that in any discourse, the “I” which announces, the “I” which speaks, goes beyond what is said. The so-called full word, the first element in my initiation, is here only a derisory figure of the following: it is that beyond everything that is articulated something speaks that we have restored in all its truth.

“I, the truth, speak in your stumbling discourse, in your shaky commitments to the subject, which sees no further than the end of your nose, the “I” does not know at all who he is. The subject of the “I” speaks, speaks somewhere that I called the locus of the Other and here is what always obliges us to take into account a figure, a structure, which is other than punctual and which organises the articulation of the subject.”

(Lacan, 1965-66. p.80)

*Never-the-less*, the 1949 Mirror Stage paper contains much that Lacan will retain and return to in his seminars and later papers, so it is worthwhile to examine the paper’s salient points.

Lacan says of the mirror stage:

“It is the moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [*savoir*] into being mediated by the other’s desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process.” (Lacan, 2006. p. 79)

Since in all of his subsequent discussions of the Mirror Stage, Lacan abandons the function of the *I*, I am going to drop it from my discussion and revert, as Lacan subsequently does, to utilizing the terms “ego” [*moi*] and “subject.”

In his paper on the mirror stage in 1949, Lacan cites the work of an American developmental psychologist, James Mark Baldwin. Working at the turn of the twentieth century, Baldwin developed a theory of steps in cognitive development that was a major influence on Piaget’s developmental theory. This is not the focus of Lacan’s interest. Rather, it was an observation garnered from Baldwin’s work “Imitation: A chapter in the

Natural History of Consciousness” that Lacan drew upon. Baldwin asserts: “My sense of myself grows by imitation of you, and my sense of yourself grows in terms of my sense of myself.” (Baldwin, 1894. p. 12)

Lacan also notes that many early developmental psychologists had established that the human infant, over the age of eight months, can already recognize his, or her, own image in the mirror, a recognition that is accompanied by “signs of triumphant jubilation” that contrast with that of other mammals, chimps for example, who see their own image as another, and after an initial testing of it reveals its emptiness as an object, they eventually lose interest. The human infant, on the other hand, recognizes the image as an image and becomes engaged in play with the image, exploring the image in the mirror as well as the mirrored environment — persons, objects, space — that is also reflected. This distinction is all the more noteworthy since it occurs in a time in the development of the human infant when the infant lacks motor control, and in fact lags behind its simian counterpart in that regard.

The moment of jubilation in front of the mirror marks what Lacan calls the “capture” by the image — the primordial identification by the infant with the gestalt of his own body. This capture by the image transforms the infant, marking forever the manner in which the human will encounter the world.

This discrete, coherent image is taken as an anticipated solution, a promise of an ideal unity, which counters the sense of discordance in the infant resulting from the physiological prematurity at birth. The neonatal “malaise,” the distress, the sense of a “fragmented body” is countered by identifying with the anticipated unity and consistency offered by the image. The form of the body is given to the infant as a gestalt that is

“more constituting than constituted.” (Lacan, 2006. p. 76) This means that the mirror stage is not a question of the infant discovering, via the image, the unity of the body, but that via the image, the body attains a certain unity that it did not possess prior to the mirror stage. Because the human infant is marked by a “specific prematurity at birth,” a “fetalization,” the mirror stage is, as Lacan calls it, “a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation.” (p. 78)

The fact that an image has important physiological effects on an organism is not an invention of Lacan, and in his article he cites documented facts taken from biology. For example, the necessary condition for sexual maturation of a female pigeon is to see a member of its own species, even just a mirror image.

Thanks to the mirror stage, through the function of *imagos*<sup>1</sup>, the subject recognizes himself in the unity that is offered by this initial image. Not merely recognizes himself, but undergoes “*an identification*,” in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.” (p. 76) As well, from this point on this ideal is going to function as “the threshold of the visible world” through which objects in the world at large will be established, beginning, Lacan points out, with the ego.

This initial, primordial identification establishes the *ideal ego*, an anticipation of wholeness, of bodily coherence as promoted by the image.

This is the establishment of primary narcissism — the origin of the ego, as the sum of identifications with the ideal images provided by the mirror.

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<sup>1</sup> *Imago* is the Latin word for image that Freud, and later Lacan, sometimes use for mental representations. The ideal ego is the example of an imago that Freud discusses in "On Narcissism".

The fact that the very form of the ego is encountered in the exterior establishes the ego in a “fictional” direction — essentially as a mirage. The ego is established in a fixed image in which right and left are reversed, in an exteriority that is ultimately alienating, while the other is established as an alter-ego, structuring the human’s relation to his environment.

This initial moment of the mirror stage, in offering an anticipated unity, also presages a life or death conflict with the small other: in confronting the other as the image of wholeness, the subject must:

“[...] either tolerate it as an unbearable image that ravages him of himself, or he must immediately smash it, that is to say to reverse the positions, to consider as annulled, annul-able, smash-able, he with whom he is faced, and to keep for himself what is at that moment the center of his being [...] The relation, the link of the image with aggressivity is completely articulable here.” (Lacan, 1961. p. 193)

This struggle also establishes the object that the subject feels is at the center of his being “as an abstract equivalence,” represented in the *fort-da* game by some “biologically indifferent” scrap. Here we have the origins of object *a*.

Again, Lacan situates the mirror stage as a moment the end of which “inaugurates [...] the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.

“The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention, as is exemplified by the fact that sexual object choice is dependent upon the Oedipus Complex.” (Lacan, 2006. p. 79)

Later Lacan will say that this aggressivity of the imaginary aspect of the mirror stage, is only moderated through the mediation by the symbolic register.

At a scientific conference in 1953 Lacan introduced the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary as constituting the essential registers of human reality, drawn from what he termed the “Freudian Experience.” While Freud did not use these terms, Lacan was able to show that the distinctions did not escape Freud; “But, of course, if it did not escape him it was out of his reach and grasp.” (Lacan 1958, p.1)

Very briefly: the imaginary register concerns the realm of images in the constitution of the subject, while the symbolic register is the field of language in which the subject is articulated in relation to signifiers. The real is what is not presented in the image, nor articulated in language. The real always escapes, it is that which is most foreign to the subject, yet at the same time it is that to which the subject is most intimately connected.

If the imaginary offers an image of wholeness, masking the real of the body as the formless, horrifying flesh of a corpse, it also pits the subject against the specular image of wholeness in a struggle to the death. If the symbolic offers the possibility of discourse — a social bond that can potentially mediate aggressivity between the subject and the small other through a third element: language — the real is a lack, a remainder left over by the operation of language, a gap in language because no signifier is fully sufficient. Signifiers ultimately only refer to another signifier in an endless chain that will always come up short. While the three registers are related to distinct aspects of the human reality, they are also knotted together — at least for the neurotic subject. Lacan will utilize the Borromean knot to demonstrate the relation of the three registers: the



knot consists of three topological circles which are linked and form a *Brunnian* link (i.e., removing any ring results in unlinked all the rings). In other words, no two of the three rings are linked with each other as a chain link, but nonetheless all three are linked.

Because the distinction between the three registers is implicit rather than explicit in Freud, in Lacan's view this led to subsequent confusions, and ultimately to deviations by Freud's followers. Lacan's intention, in introducing the three registers was to develop a "certain orientation of study of psychoanalysis" that would counter the deviations and misunderstandings.

In one such example, Lacan cited a passage from "On Narcissism," in which Freud discusses the ideal ego, then the ego-ideal:

The paragraph from Freud is as follows:

"This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal." (Freud, 1914/1957. p.94)

In his article from 1960, “Remarks on Daniel Lagache’s Presentation,” Lacan notes that: “Although Freud distinguishes the terms ego-ideal and ideal ego in an unmistakable fashion, since the inversion occurs in one and the same text, we still cannot distinguish their use in the text, this should worry us, for, to the best of our knowledge, Freud was never even slightly sloppy in his use of signifiers.” (Lacan, 2006 p.563)

For Lacan, Freud is not constructing a developmental psychology, but something far more radical: Freud is articulating the structure of the unconscious; for Lacan, this structure is like that of language — the relation of one signifier not to a signified, but to another signifier.

In his “Remarks to Daniel Lagache,” Lacan takes great pains to distinguish a structure from what is ‘directly observable’ to avoid remaining at the level of phenomena.

He notes: “[...] the effects that the pure and simple combinatory of the signifier determines in the reality in which it is produced. For is it not structuralism that allows us to posit our experience as the field in which it [ça] speaks?” (Lacan, 2006. p.544

However, if Lacan privileges “structure” over “direct observation” of phenomena, how are we to then understand Lacan’s reference to a “stage”?

First, I take Lacan’s insistence on the primacy of “structure” to mean that the Mirror Stage is obviously not to be understood as his contribution to a series of developmental stages. Lacan is not at all interested in a developmental psychology of the individual.

In order to grasp to how Lacan was conceptualizing the Mirror Stage, it is interesting to contrast it with the work of a contemporary, Henri Wallon, who developed *l'épreuve du miroir*. [the mirror experience, or experiment] in 1931. As a side note, one often stumbles across accounts of Lacan's mirror stage in which much is made of his supposed dependence upon the work of Henri Wallon, whom Lacan does not credit. Who knows why Lacan doesn't mention Wallon — perhaps it was because Lacan's position was antithetical to that of Wallon. In fact, for that very reason, an examination of Wallon's *epreuve du miroir* is helpful in clarifying what Lacan is proposing with the mirror stage.

Wallon, a colleague of Lacan's, was a psychiatrist and developmental psychologist who had proposed his own developmental series, a step of which he called *l'épreuve du miroir*, taking place during what Wallon designated as the “sensorimotor and projective stage.”

As Elizabeth Rudinesco writes, “At the time [Wallon] wrote his paper on the psychogenesis of the body proper and the unity of the self, [he] did not establish any relation between his own method and Freud's. He situated his experiment in the context of a psychology centered on the primacy of a dialectical consciousness in which the unconscious barely had a role.” (Rudinesco,1990. p.71) Wallon's *epreuve du miroir* consists of observations of the changes in the reactions of infants of advancing ages to their mirror image. Wallon is concerned with how their behavior in relation to their image in an actual mirror indicates the stage of intellectual development attained.

The *epreuve du miroir* is a behavioral experiment, drawing on observations of infants in front of a mirror, while as Lacan rather dryly remarks in his seminar on

Transference “But beware, [the mirror stage] is obviously a schema a little bit more elaborated than that of the concrete experience which occurs in front of the mirror.”

(Lacan, 1960-61. p. 192)

The mirror in the Mirror Stage is a metaphor for a moment in the emergence of the subject, and is not the mirror in front of which an infant plays. It is a symbolic mirror, Lacan says, that signifies a certain reflection made with the help of words.

The “mirror stage” is not optimally “mastered” and then “surpassed” like each of Wallon’s steps. In his theory of the *Origins of the Character of the Child* Wallon is interested in a demonstration that shows, via an advancing response to the image in the mirror, the “normal” steps in the advancing intellectual mastery of the infant, and the progressive emergence of consciousness. The mirror “experiment,” for Wallon, serves as the preparatory condition for the emergence of the consciousness of the self.

Wallon establishes, through the mirror “experiment,” a chronology of recognition, in which, according to Wallon, the infant initially recognizes only others through the image (seeing his own image as other), and then later learns to recognize himself through his image as a distinct, conscious, individual — separate from the others around him. This demonstrates, for Wallon, the development of an increasing grasp of reality through the emergence of consciousness.

For Lacan, the mirror stage first of all has nothing to do with consciousness, and contrary to Wallon’s assertion, shows that the ego, the sense of self, is an identification with the image of the small other. As for developing the ability to grasp reality, Lacan’s interest is in showing that it is only through the mirage of the ego that the subject will have a relation to the world.

Additionally, The Mirror Stage is not a chronological moment in the advancing intellectual development of the individual. Lacan, in his paper, takes as a referent a particular moment in the development of an infant as it has been observed by many psychologists. However, he is not situating the mirror stage as a psychological stage, but rather as a psychoanalytic “time.” Lacan considered the mirror stage as representing a logical moment in the structure of subjectivity. The fact that its effects may be observable at a certain moment in the life of an infant should not obscure, for the psychoanalyst, the fact that what is at stake is structure.

Lacan later makes his position on the question of “stages” very clear at the end of one of the sessions of the Seminar “The Four Fundamental Concepts,” in replying to a remark of Françoise Dolto:

*F. DOLTO: I don't see how, in describing the formation of intelligence up to the age of three or four, one can do without stages. I think that as far as the defense phantasies and the phantasies of the castration veil are concerned, and also the threats of mutilation, one needs to refer to the stages.*

*LACAN: The description of the stages, which go to form the libido, must not be referred to some natural process of pseudo-maturation, which always remains opaque. The stages are organized around the fear of castration. The copulatory fact of the introduction of sexuality is traumatizing—this is a snag of some size—and it has an organizing function for development.*

*The fear of castration is like a thread that perforates all the stages of development. It orientates the relations that are anterior to its actual appearance —weaning, toilet training, etc. It crystallizes each of these moments in a dialectic that has as its center a*

*bad encounter. If the stages are consistent, it is in accordance with their possible registration in terms of bad encounters.* (Lacan, 1998. p. 64)

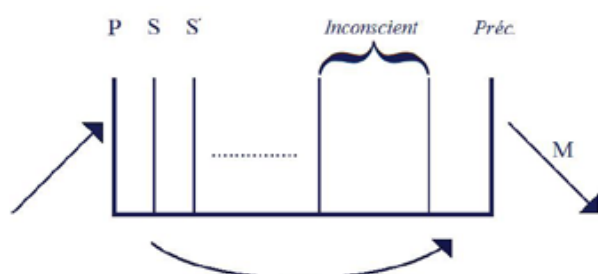
What Lacan is distinguishing in his remarks to Dolto is the *Après-Coup* effect, as he translated Freud's term *Nachträglichkeit*, a process in which what comes *after* chronologically, structurally determines all that has preceded it, versus the psychologist's model of a progressive development that builds upon what came before. If the central thread of the so called stages is the fear of castration, this means that development is organized around the question of the desire of the Other.

What is at stake is that throughout every stage, rather than some sort of successful completion of steps, there is a return of a bad encounter. A bad encounter that, *après-coup*, signifies castration, a bad encounter that is structural, rather than phenomenological.

If Lacan refers to the mirror "stage," let's situate it not as a stage in a sequence of stages of psychological development, but as a stage upon which a scene is presented. The "Other Scene," in Freud's terms. The mirror stage presents a scene in the mirror that is separate from where the spectator is, marking a distinction between "the world" and the stage upon which the things of the world are represented, in image and in signifiers. The things of the world are presented upon the scene according to the laws of the signifier, which, as Lacan specifies, are in no way homologous to those of the world.

The mirror stage is a logical moment that determines the subject in relation to the real, the symbolic and the imaginary by establishing through the symbolic some stability to the image, which masks the real.

In his first published Seminar from 1953, *Freud's Technical Writings*, Lacan comments that Freud's schema of the psychological apparatus from the *Traumdeutung* is an optical model, which proceeds from perception, through different layers — leaving “recorded traces” that are repressed and make up the Unc.



Freud's schema maps “psychical locality” as that which takes place in the gap between perception and the “motor consciousness of the ego.” However, Freud explicitly states that he is not locating the psyche in relation to anatomy, and gives the metaphor of optical instruments in which the image corresponds to psychical locality in that it is not located in any of the mechanical features of the optical instrument, but to an “ideal point, regions in which no tangible component of the apparatus is situated.” Freud cautioned against mistaking the “scaffolding for the building,” remarking that “at our first approach to something unknown all that we need is the assistance of provisional ideas.” (Lacan 1953 - 54. p. 235)

Noting that much of the theoretical elaborations that have followed Freud have precisely confused the scaffolding for the building, Lacan utilizes Freud's statement as authorization to introduce his own optical apparatus: the schema of the inverted bouquet, as a “substitute” for the mirror stage.

Lacan also clarifies that “the mirror stage is not simply an historical affair, a point in development of genesis, but it also has an exemplary function, in revealing certain of

the subject's relations to [...] his image, in so far as it is the *Urbild* [archetype] of the ego." (p.232).

Lacan proposes his schema with a wonderful introduction, he says:

"What was the classic experience in the time when physics was amusing, when one made experiments? The same as us, we are at the moment when it is really psychoanalysis: the closer we get to psychoanalysis that is amusing, the more it is true psychoanalysis. Later on, it will become worn in [*rodé*], done only through approximations and tricks: one will no longer understand what one is doing. The same as there is no need to understand anything about optics in order to make a microscope. But rejoice, we are still doing psychoanalysis [...]" (p.238)

So, emulating Freud's utilization of an optical model, Lacan will also refer to an optical apparatus. Optics has the value of being the science of images, and while these images are not precisely the images that psychoanalysis deals with, never-the-less, as Lacan states, "they share a name," (p.235) something that matters to a psychoanalyst.

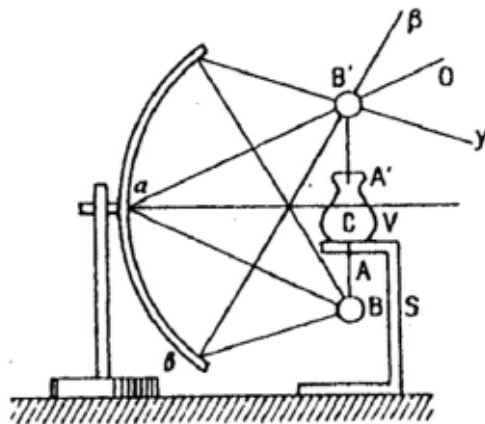
Lacan remarks that optics are founded on a symbolic structural hypothesis: Although "Imaginary and real space merge together, that doesn't preclude that they have to be thought of as different." That "[...] in order for there to be a possible optics, there has to be the possibility of the representation of a given point in real space [...]. For this point [in real space], [...] there can only correspond a single point in [...] imaginary space. This is the fundamental structural hypothesis.

"This has an air of being excessively simple, but if one doesn't begin from there, one absolutely cannot write the least equation, symbolize the least thing, that is to say that optics is absolutely impossible." (p. 350)



Optics specifies two different types of images. There are virtual images, the images that appear in the mirror, and then there are what are called “real” images that project in front of the reflective surface. A rainbow is a “real” image. Real images appear as if they were objects, and can be taken as objects. A rainbow appears like an object in the world, one can photograph a rainbow. And thus, it is possible to give a virtual image of a real image. One can hold up a mirror to a rainbow and it will appear in the mirror as a virtual image. It is important to keep in mind that whether the image is “real” or “virtual,” they are both functioning within the realm of the imaginary, which is the register of images.

The “inverted bouquet” is a device that produces an amusing illusion: an image of a bouquet of flowers that is hidden inside a box out of view of the observer, appears, inverted, as if located in a real vase that sits atop the box, thanks to the reflective properties of a concave mirror.



For his schema, Lacan modifies the original apparatus, reversing the positions of the bouquet and the vase, so the vase is not directly visible, while the bouquet is placed

on top of the surface of the box. In Lacan's version it is an image of a vase that appears to contain the otherwise unbound bouquet of flowers. This does not change the fundamental function of the apparatus, which involves a hidden real that is reproduced in the imaginary.

This illusion happens due to the optical properties of a concave mirror which projects a "real" image, as opposed to the virtual image in a flat mirror.

An important factor is that the observer, or more exactly, the eye of the observer has to be located properly in relation to the concave mirror in order for the bouquet to appear to be contained within the vase. A "real" image requires a screen upon which it is projected and this screen, the retina, has to be placed in a predetermined area: within the cone  $B-B'-y$ . (*Beta*, *Beta'*, *gamma*) The bouquet functions as the "fulcrum of accommodation," (in optical terms) upon which the eye focuses in such a way that it can receive the "real" image.

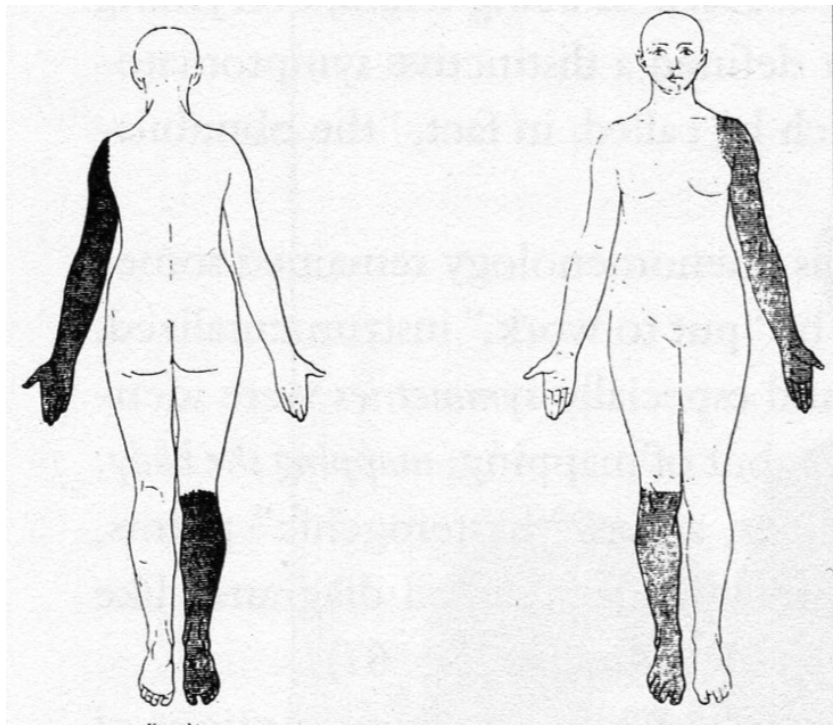
Why is Lacan interested in this schema? For what can be clarified about the structure of the psyche through the metaphor of this schema. He underscores the fact that rather than representing some "anatomical conduction pathways," his use of the schema is that, by analogy, it represents the constitutive aspect of relations to the other and makes "it possible to distinguish here the twofold impact of the imaginary and the symbolic." This schema also further separates his concept of the Mirror Stage from the idea that it could be an observable behavior in some developmental progression.

As noted before, the theory of the mirror stage is predicated on the pre-maturation of the human infant, and that "the sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject mastery over his body" (Lacan, 2006. p.79) but only in an

anticipatory manner that is separate from the process of physical maturation: “The subject anticipates on the achievement of psychological mastery, and this anticipation will leave its mark on every subsequent exercise of effective motor mastery.” (p.79)

The mirror stage is an originary experience, one in which man for the first time sees himself, reflects on himself and conceives of himself as *other than he is*. This is an essentially human experience, and entirely structures his whole phantasmatic life. (p.79)

Among other things, this gives us an appreciation for how closely the functioning of the body is tied to the psyche and to the image of the body, and certainly has consequences for theorizing psychosomatic and hysteric manifestations. One thinks of Charcot’s diagrams of hysterical paralysis that adhere not to the anatomical structure of the nervous system, but to an image of the body.



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<sup>2</sup> Schema of the zones of hysterical anesthesia published in *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, Paris: (1888). Reprinted in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 180.

The first significance that Lacan draws from the Optical Schema concerns the formation of the *Ur-Ich*, the primitive ego that Freud states is constituted by a differentiation between what is included inside and what is rejected. For Freud the essential question of the initial, primitive formation of the ego is that of inclusion and exclusion.

Freud refers to this process of the formation of the *Ur-Ich*, this moment when the image of the body allows the subject to situate what is “me” and what is not, in his paper “Negation”:

“The function of judgement is concerned in the main with two sorts of decisions. [...] As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical.” (Freud, 1925/p.236)

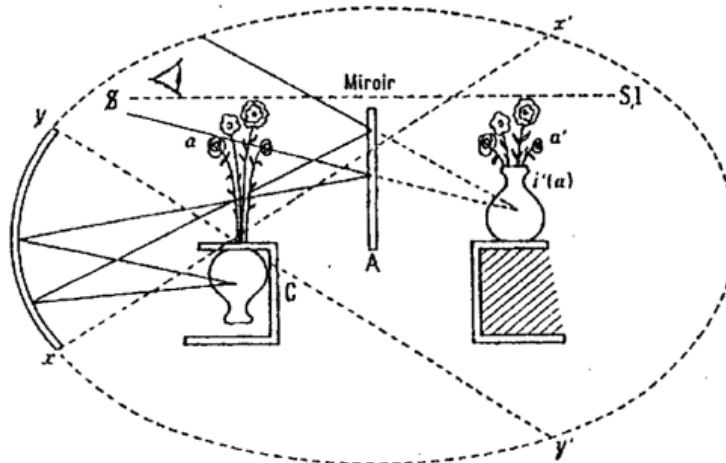
The schema of the inverted bouquet provides a metaphor for this moment: the *image of the vase* contains and masks the bouquet of flowers, the “flowers of desire” — portraying the first grasping by the subject, the first decision of inclusion that defines a border, which then excludes whatever is outside the border. By providing an image of the form of the body, the mirror stage provides the possibility of inclusion or exclusion within a field that had previous been completely undifferentiated. It portrays the “birth of the ego,” according to Lacan. (Lacan, 2006. p. 79)

In the apparatus, the box that hides the real vase represents the inaccessible body before the birth of the ego, while the bouquet stands for the “wandering” objects of desire. Only if the eye is positioned in a particular location *vis a vis* the concave mirror,

will the image of the vase — the ego — appear to contain the bouquet, and to give coherence to an otherwise “fragmented body.”

The eye is not the position of an objective, scientific observer, conducting an experiment. As Lacan notes: “in life, obviously, things are completely different, precisely because we are not an eye.”(Lacan 1953-54 p. 245) So what is the meaning of the eye in Lacan’s use of the schema?

It symbolizes the subject. Of course, the subject is not an eye, but as Lacan says “this model can be applied because we are in the imaginary where the eye has great importance.” (p. 351)



In the initial schema, the “real” image of the vase containing the flowers is a metaphor for primary narcissism “in so far as it makes possible the organization of the totality of reality into a limited number of frameworks.” (p. 253)

Lacan notes that the “real” image of the vase that contains the flowers has a certain instability — if the position of the eye shifts, the quality of the “real” image is

affected. Lacan notes that the position of this eye representing the subject has a particular importance: “In the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world [...] everything depends on the position of the subject.” (p. 245)

And even when the eye is correctly positioned, there is a further modification necessary for the vase to appear under optimal conditions, as Lacan says, “as clearly as if it were at the end of the room.” (p. 352) To produce these optimum conditions Lacan places a flat mirror in the center of the apparatus, and the observer is shifted, placed among the flowers with their back to the concave mirror. What is presented to the observer by the flat mirror is a virtual image of the “real” image of the vase containing the flowers, as well as an image of their “own face, there where it isn’t” precisely at the spot corresponding to the one from which the subject initially saw his image. Lacan initially labels this VS: virtual subject. (p. 398)

The virtual subject is “the other that we are, is there where we first saw our ego — outside us, in the human form.” (p. 399) The mirage of himself, Lacan calls it.

In the more elaborate schema, the virtual image presented in the flat mirror corresponds to secondary narcissism the pattern of which is the relation to the other. The other, by virtue of their perceived unity, has a captivating effect on the subject due to the unity proffered by the image, or “in the entire reality of the fellow being.”

“Secondary narcissism is ... this identification with the other that, under normal circumstances, is what allows man to situate exactly what, in his being, has a fundamental imaginary and libidinal relation to the world in general. That is, it allows him to see his being in its place and to structure it as a function of this place and of his world.” (p.355)

The position of the eye (\$) corresponds to a mirroring of the eye's initial position in the first version of the optical apparatus, and the subject is seen in a reflection that is in relation to the other, in relation to the *ideal ego*.

In his schema, the flat mirror is labeled A, big Other. The infant turns towards the big Other looking for assent, and what comes from the big Other is a sign, the gaze of the big Other affirming the image, *i(a)*. "This specular image, desirable and destructive at the same time, is, or not, effectively desired by the one towards whom he turns, at the very place where the subject at that moment identifies himself, sustains this identification to this image." (Lacan, 1960 - 61. p. 193)

As we know, the position of the parent's attitude toward their infant can vary, represented in the optical schema by a shifting of the flat mirror. What the subject, now located among the flowers, sees in the mirror is an image that, depending on the placement of the flat mirror, will be more or less sharp, incomplete, broken up, lacking in consistency. The mirror could be too far to one side or the other, tipped forward or back, angled too much one way or the other, or distorted, like a fun-house mirror.

"As for the virtual spectator, the one who becomes your substitute through the fiction of the mirror in order to see the real image, all that's necessary is for the plane mirror to be inclined in a specific way for him to be in the field in which one sees very poorly. From this fact alone, you will all see the image in the mirror very poorly. Let's say this represents the uneasy accommodation of the imaginary in man." (Lacan, 1953-4. P. 400)

All sorts of mistakes in the placement of the flat mirror are possible. The misplacement of the flat mirror is such that it removes the virtual spectator from the

correct position and disrupts the appearance of the image of the vase — the “real” ego, since its appearance was predicated on the virtual subject being stationed correctly. A disruption of the mirror image causes something of the real to assert itself, since the image no longer manages to mask the real.

This could produce the effect of the uncanny — for example the “double” which Freud links with the earliest formations of the ego and primary narcissism, and whose unexpected appearance produces a profound unease.

One part of reality is imaginary, masking the other part that is the real — this is the basis of the mirror relation, that Lacan designates as “the plane of projection.”

Projection does not have as a correlative “introjection,” which is always the introjection of the speech of the Other. Located in a quite different place than that of the ego, the subject is in the symbolic world, in the world of speech. It is depending upon how the subject is situated in relation to language — to the speech of the Other — that will affect whether or not the “eye” is located properly for the imaginary vase to appear. This is what pertains, not to the dual relation, which is a function of the *ideal ego*, but to the introjection of the speech of the Other that is in relation to the function of the *Ego Ideal*.

The flat mirror in the optical schema represents the big Other as the locus of speech, and the manner in which the subject finds their place in relation to a signifier in the big Other. The name that the Other has chosen for them, or the simple fact that the infant is held up to a mirror by an adult who says of the image “That’s you!”



This gives a sense of the possibility of the different ways that the flat mirror's placement can vary, and how that displacement of the flat mirror alters the image that it presents to the subject.

We see the three registers articulated by Lacan in his usage of the schema: It is the position of the subject in relation to the symbolic that regulates the relation of the imaginary to the real. It is the symbolic relation that will define the position of the subject as seeing (placed properly for the image to appear) and as seen.

This demonstrates the distinction between ideal ego and ego ideal. The ego ideal, the place from which the subject is seen, (I), is what introduces the symbolic relation which then governs all relations with others (ideal egos), upon which the more or less satisfactory character of the imaginary structuration depends.

Without a proper place in language that situates the subject as symbolized in the schema by the eye, the image will be unstable.

To go back to the initial simple schema, Lacan says that it demonstrates an imaginary phenomena that can be articulated with sexual behavior, and Lacan notes that in the animal world the entire cycle of sexual behavior is dominated by the imaginary — this has been demonstrated in countless behavioral experiments in which an animal is presented with a lure — the bare minimum of the representation of a sexual partner, an outline for example, which turns out to be sufficient to trigger a sexual response. This is thrilling for behavioral psychology, which then draws all sorts of parallels with human sexuality. However, Lacan asks: is this really true for man as well? Is the lure to which the animal responds with sexual behavior the equivalent of the ideal ego? Lacan uses his optical apparatus in order to address this question,

stating that the real image produced by the concave mirror coincides with the lure to which the animal responds. The real image is inserted into the world of real objects, and it is the coincidence of the real image of the vase and the real object, the bouquet, that strengthens the real image, giving it body and substance. At this moment the animal is “guided towards its object, with the image as a go-between.”(p. 396) It is the lure of the real image that invests the real object.

In man, however, there is what Lacan terms here “an eminent disorder” characterizing the manifestation of the sexual function. (p. 396) Already in 1954 Lacan’s remarks presage his famous adage from his seminar *Encore* that there is no sexual rapport.

Instead, psychoanalytic practice reveals that for the human subject the image presents something quite different: “A sort of fragmentation, of rupture, of breaking up, of lack of adaptation, of inadequation.” For the human the image doesn’t act as a go-between, guiding towards the sexual object, but rather there is a “game of hide and seek between the image and its normal object.” (p. 396) Lacan asks, if this is case for the human subject, then what constitutes the end of an analysis? How can psychoanalysis propose the “Eldorado” of genital love, the supposed conclusion of a natural process that has been derailed by various neuroses as the aim of a successful cure? When psychoanalysis demonstrates that the achievement of “genital love” is not a natural process for humans, but “simply a series of cultural approximations, which are only capable of being realized in certain cases?” (p. 397)

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## Part 2

Martin Winn

In his optical schema, first proposed in his Seminar I, Lacan elaborates upon an optical apparatus from an “amusing” physics demonstration. This apparatus produces, due to a concave mirror, a “real image” of a hidden bouquet that appears to be placed within a vase that is on top of a box within which the actual bouquet is hidden. Lacan makes several modifications to this apparatus: first by exchanging the positions of the bouquet and the vase, so that it is the vase that is hidden from view, and that appears as a “real” image to contain the flowers that are now on top of the box.

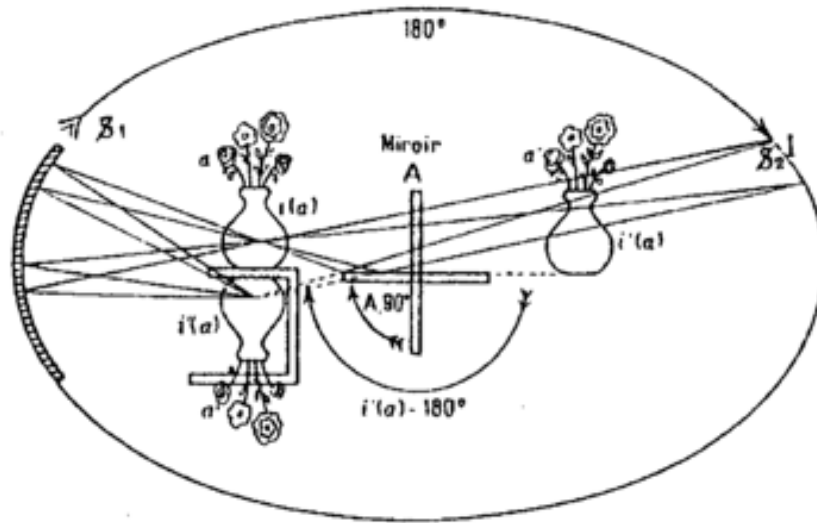
Lacan then inserts a flat mirror that represents the big Other. The subject is shifted to the edge of the concave mirror, facing the flat mirror. From this position the subject is no longer placed to apperceive the real image  $i(a)$ . Henceforth the only possibility for the eye to see the image of the vase containing the flowers is to look for it in the Big Other of the flat mirror. This opens a virtual space, the space of imaginary formations where the subject apperceives his own form. Through the image, the body is perceived as a unity, as the ego, but the subject seizes it as facing him, as if it were an other, outside of himself, situated where he is not: the ideal ego. The mirror offers the mirage of mastery in opposition to the body proper  $i(a)$  that is not accessible to consciousness, and the subject is alienated in an imaginary identification to the virtual image due to the mirage of autonomy that the narcissistic capture offers.

It is only through the flat mirror, the Big Other — the locus of language — that the subject can grasp his image, showing the way that the imaginary and the symbolic are

both engaged in the mirror stage. In the schema the place of the subject,  $\$$ , is symmetrical to the place on the right of  $l$ . Thus the subject is placed to see a reflection of what he would see if he were located at the place of  $l$ . This designates the role of the Ego Ideal — as Freud says, the place from where I would like to be seen. The subject's position is regulated by the position of the Ego Ideal. That is, in order to be in the correct position to see the ideal ego, the subject sustains a position symmetrical to that of the Ego Idea.

Lacan notes that only if the subject were able to “real-ly” occupy the position of  $l$ , would it be possible to “see” object  $a$ , an impossibility since it would mean entering the virtual space of the virtual image.

In relation to this “virtual” positioning of the subject at the place of  $l$ , in his paper “Remarks on Daniel Lagache’s presentation...” Lacan uses the optical schema to articulate the direction of the treatment. In the initial demand by a patient to an analyst, the patient is addressing an imaginary small other  $i'(a)$  in search of an ideal ego, but the demand also aims for something beyond the imaginary: the analysand wants to elevate the analyst to the position of the Ego Ideal. If the analyst knows how to occupy the position of analyst in the treatment and doesn't lend him or herself to the imaginary capture of the ideal ego, nor to the lure of occupying the place of knowing — the Ego Ideal — the analyst will come to occupy the place of the Big Other for the subject: the flat mirror in the optical schema, the place of speech, of the speech of the analysand. Once this is established, the unfolding of the cure can be represented by the pivoting of the mirror from vertical to horizontal.



“[T]he Other, as mirror A, can, through an almost double rotation, lead the subject from  $S_1$  to position  $S_2$  at  $I$ , a position which gave him only virtual access to the inverted vase illusion in [the schema with the vertical flat mirror]. In this movement, however, the illusion fades along with the quest that it guides, confirming that the effects of depersonalization observed in analysis, in more or less discrete forms, should be considered less as signs of a limit than a breakthrough.” (Lacan, 2006. p.569)

From this position the subject now directly views the inverted bouquet illusion in the flat mirror “like its reflection in water” as an inverted virtual image below the real image.

Metaphorically this represents a new perspective for the subject in which the structure of the illusion of the ego is revealed, in which objects are revealed as lures. This implies a certain devalorization of the position of the ideal ego —the upside down reflection —, as well as a devalorization of the Ego Ideal:  $\$2$  is the point from which what is seen is not object  $a$ , but rather the “vanity” of the object. Lacan contrasts this with Michael Balint’s conception of the end of an analysis in which the “patient believes he has exchanged his ego for his analyst’s ego,” Lacan adds “Let us hope, for his sake, that nothing of the kind has happened.” (p.571)

At this point Lacan notes the limits of his optical model, remarking that it harks back to a “preliminary stage” of his teaching. He adds that if this manipulation of the optical schema figures the “terminus of the analysis, it is not analysis’ end and even if we see here the end of the means the analysis has employed, they are not the means by which to reach its end.” (p. 571) Lacan notes that it is desire, not “any ideal based quest” that is at stake in the end of an analysis, and that the optical model fails to shed light on the function of object  $a$ . This function is in relation — not to an ideal— but to desire as the object of desire.

Lacan notes that the object  $a$  when reflected in the mirror “only gives  $a'$ ,” what he terms “the standard of exchange, the currency with which the [small] other’s desire enters the circuit of the ideal egos’ transitivity.” What isn’t reflected in the schema is that object  $a$  is also functioning in the field of the big Other, as the exponent of the desire of the Big Other.

Lacan asserts that it is the discovery of what the subject was as object  $a$  in the desire of the Big Other that is linked to the “true terminus” of an analysis. Lacan links



this to the function of the “lost signifier to which the subject sacrifices his phallus,” indicating that at this time Lacan linked the end of analysis, as did Freud, to an acceptance of castration.

In his seminar on *Angst* Lacan returns to the optical schema to respond to a question concerning a certain hiatus or gap remaining in his articulation of the relation of the specular image to the signifier. Lacan’s initial answer was to say that the person asking him the question was probably aware that “the word hiatus, cut or split is nothing other than the expected response.” (Lacan, 1962-63, p. 42) However, Lacan admits that this quip is not really enough to adequately address the question, so he sets out to give a grounding for this gap, which is going to involve a more complex elaboration of the concept of object *a*. This will lead him to eventually assert that object *a* “literally does not have a [specular image].” (p. 58)

This definition of object *a* as not having a mirror image seems a surprising claim — particularly because Lacan makes this statement in referring to the optical schema, a schema that is constructed around mirrors, the images produced and the correlation of small *a* with the image of the small other.

We have understood that the whole point has been that the image of an object, labeled *a*, appeared in a mirror. There it is, we can point at it, we can see the image, and Lacan has been discussing the manner in which this image has a profound impact on the subject. But suddenly this amusing optical schema, that seemed so clear in its implications, so graspable, is turned on its head: there where we think we see an image represented, Lacan now says that there is no image.

So how are we supposed to understand Lacan's new claim that what he now calls object *a* has no image in the mirror? Is it supposed to be like a vampire? We hold up a mirror, and the mirror is empty?

In order to continue to follow Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage, it is necessary to take a detour along the path of Lacan's development of his invention, *objet petit a*, object little *a* —or object *a*.

Object *a* originated in Lacan's investigations of narcissism and its relation to the specular image. Through 1959, up to the end of *Desire and its Interpretation*, this object is essentially the little other, *l'autre imaginaire*, (hence *objet a*) and therefore the pattern of narcissism, since the little other and the mirror image are one and the same thing according to the mirror stage. However, as we have seen, even in his earliest elaborations, Lacan indicated that the mirror stage establishes the object that the subject feels is at the center of his being as an "abstract equivalence," (Lacan, 2006. p. 79) represented in the *fort-da* game by some "biologically indifferent" scrap (Lacan, 1938. p.14).

If the imaginary relation is one in which the image of the other presents the anticipation of wholeness, it is also confirming a lack in the subject while presenting the small other as possessing what could complete the subject. Thus, aggressivity is inherent in the imaginary capture that pits the subject against the small other in a struggle to the death.

"Either the other is [for the subject] an intolerable image that steals him from himself, or [the other] must immediately be subdued. The positions reversed: to

consider as annulled, annul-able, breakable this other facing him, and to retain for himself what is at this moment the center of his being [...].” (Lacan, 1960-61. p. 192)

A struggle to the death over what? What is the center of the subjects being?

Not everything takes place at the imaginary level. While it is through the imaginary register that the world and its objects are narcissistically invested, modeled on the image that is the basis of the ego, not everything belongs to the “kingdom of narcissism.”

Lacan notes that: “This cathexis of the specular image is a fundamental moment of the imaginary relationship, fundamental in the fact that there is a limit and the fact is that the whole of libidinal cathexis does not pass through the specular image.” (Lacan, 2014. p.38) A part remains invested in the body proper.

This limit is not represented in the optical schema. Since it is an image, it falls victim itself to the very illusion that the imaginary proposes to the subject: that of the possibility of an undivided subject. If the flowers in the schema are meant to represent the objects of desire, the illusion presented in the imaginary is that these objects could have an image and that the subject could see it included in his own image as reflected in the small other. As Lacan remarks, “The ambiguity comes from the way in which we cannot but imagine this object in the specular register.” (p. 59)

One of the properties of the imaginary, in fact the very property that Lacan’s new assertion about object *a* addresses, is that the imaginary presents a mirage that masks loss or absence. As we have noted, the mirror image poses a mirage of unity, of anticipated completion, of “mastery,” of wholeness — in relation to lack, incompleteness

on the part of the infant. As Lacan develops object *a*, he is trying to address more precisely the lack, and its psychical function, its permanence.

To follow Lacan in his articulation of the mirror stage, we need to remember that the articulation of the subject to the small other and to the big Other do not exist separately. The specular relationship is dependent upon the fact that the subject is constituted in the locus of the big Other.

To illustrate this, Lacan emphasizes the moment in the mirror stage when following the initial jubilation at the sight of its image, the infant turns away from the mirror towards the “one who represents the big Other” as if for the big Other’s assent. In this rotation of the infant’s head from the image to the Other, the infant is verifying that its image is being viewed from the position of the big Other, which, as, Lacan notes, is a kind of demand that the big Other ratify the image. If the image of the body is assumed in a jubilatory moment that marks the specular experience, there is also a price to be paid: the jubilation arises from the fact that the infant suddenly sees that he can be other — but only on the condition of recognition by the big Other. The infant turns towards the big Other who is holding him before the mirror in order to see a sign of the big Other’s recognition of the image, demonstrating the interdependence of the imaginary and the symbolic registers. On the imaginary plane what is articulated is the Ideal Ego, while on the level of the symbolic, the Ego Ideal.

Lacan will note that in the optical schema, the subject, \$, only appears through the intervention of language, “the big A, the Other in so far as he is the Other of the speaking subject, the Other in so far as through him, the locus of the word, there comes

to operate for every subject — for every subject with whom we, for our part, have to deal as analysts — the incidence of the signifier.” (Lacan, 1960-61, p. 204)

In relation to this subject we can also designate the place of what is going to function as Ego Ideal. Initially labeling this point the “virtual subject,” (p. 205) Lacan calls it an “artifice” (p. 205) that the subject utilizes in order to be able to grasp the real image  $i(a)$  because the subject is not located at  $I$ . He is not there because the subject can only place himself there through the mediation of the Other — the flat mirror — because, Lacan says, since the subject is nothing, he cannot see himself there. In any case it is not as subject that he looks for himself in the mirror.

The position of the subject in the schema is in relation to  $I$ , distinct from the place where the virtual image  $i'(a)$  is projected. If it were not distinct, then there would be no exit from the dual relationship of  $i(a) : i'(a)$ : “if the other is nothing other than the one who sends me back my image, I am only indeed, in effect, nothing other, than what I see myself to be. Literally, I am the big Other as other in so far as he himself, if he exists, sees the same thing as I, he also sees himself at my place.” (p. 206) This is the imaginary mirage of the ego.

This field of narcissistic investment — the relation to the ideal ego — is to be distinguished from the identifications with the Ego Ideal,  $I$  in the schema. This identification, rather than a projection, consists of an introjection, as Freud defines it in mourning. It is not a question of a completely enveloping global identification, but of a single trait, the unary trait; *einzigiger Zug*. The identifications with the Ego Ideal are always identifications through isolated traits, singular traits and through traits that have the structure of a signifier, which will be introjected as a unary trait.

“This point [I] of the unique trait is a sign of the Other's assent, of the love-choice upon which the subject precisely can operate, can regulate himself in the subsequent operation of the mirror, it is there somewhere, it suffices that the subject should coincide there in his relationship with the Other in order that this little sign, this *einzigster Zug*, should be at his disposition.”

“The radical distinction between the Ego Ideal [...] and the ideal ego, is that one is a symbolic introjection, like every introjection — the Ego Ideal — while the ideal ego is the source of an imaginary projection .” (Lacan, p.194-5)

It is only on the grounds of the assent of the Big Other that the investment in the specular image is possible. If we have had the impression that the formation of the ideal ego precedes the Ego Ideal, Lacan's assertion is that the ideal ego is only possible if there is assent from the Ego Ideal. (And in his seminar on Transference, Lacan has noted that the “actual” or “infantile” ego is possible due to the capture by the specular image — the ideal ego.) (p.193) So, Lacan seems to have completely reversed Freud's sequence from his paper on Narcissism in which according to Freud, the ideal ego receives the narcissistic investment that had originally been enjoyed by the actual or infantile ego. And then as the child develops and is subjected to the admonitions of others and to their own critical judgement, Freud asserts that the child loses the sense of perfection afforded by the ideal ego, and seeks to recover it in the form of an Ego Ideal. This sequence is contained in the paragraph from *On Narcissism* in which Lacan noted Freud's ambiguous usage of the terms “ideal ego” and “Ego Ideal.” (Freud, 1914/1957. p. 94)

What Lacan shows is that these formations occur *après-coup*. There is no pre-verbal state of the speaking being leading to the verbal stage, not only because every infant is born into a state of language that is already waiting for their arrival, but also because the subject is an effect of language itself. Only once language intervenes does a state “before language” exist, but it exists as lost.

This *après-coup* effect will retroactively modify all that chronologically preceded it, and in that transformation there is a retroactive loss. If language is the murder of the thing, there was no thing to be killed by language before there was language to invoke the already assassinated thing. What’s also important to note is that there is a framing that takes place, a limit or a border that is established by the loss. Lacan will articulate this loss with object *a*.

This still doesn’t clarify the status of object *a* as an object with no image in the mirror. However, in indicating the role of the big Other as the locus of language, Lacan will further elaborate object *a* in re-examining the *Fort-da* game that he had discussed in his 1938 article *La famille*. Lacan now emphasizes that what is at stake is the constitution of the subject: the infant, separated from the big Other as primal mother, is articulating signifiers. The spool that drops out of sight and then is retrieved represents not only the absence and presence of his mother, but of the subject as well, in the sense that it represents something essential that is taken away from the subject.

The spool “[...]is a small bit of the subject that detaches itself while very much still retained by him [...] For if it is true to say that the signifier is the first mark of the subject, how can we not apply that here, and from the very fact that this game is accompanied by one of the first phonemic oppositions to appear [...] how can we not

recognize that it is in this to which the opposition is applied in act, it is there that we must designate the subject. Namely in the spool to which otherwise we will give it's Lacanian algebraic name under the term of (a)." (Lacan (1964), p. 32)

The *Fort-da* game symbolizes the subject's confrontation with a loss of a part of himself, and the way that this loss is fundamental to the functioning of language. The game is based on a pair of signifiers that designate an opposition, which divides the subject due to the effects of the signifier as pure difference. This symbolization is not simply a symbolization of loss, but is a loss that occurs due to symbolization, establishing the divided subject and *object a*.

Lacan will write the formula of the functioning of language and the advent of *object a*:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{S1} & \rightarrow & \underline{S2} \\ \$ & & a \end{array}$$

Two signifiers, *fort* and *da* ( $S1 \rightarrow S2$ ), establish nothing except their difference from each other, which also establishes their connection. Representing in the interval the subject as divided ( $\$$ ): The subject in this game is split between being represented as *fort* "gone" in relation to *da* "there," and vice-versa. The spool represents something essential of the subject that is detached in the "birth" of the divided subject, and is lost. The subject will never be whole, even when the spool is "there," because the signifier "there" means nothing on its own, it only implies "gone." What is lost is what could, only in the phantasm, make the subject whole: *object a*.

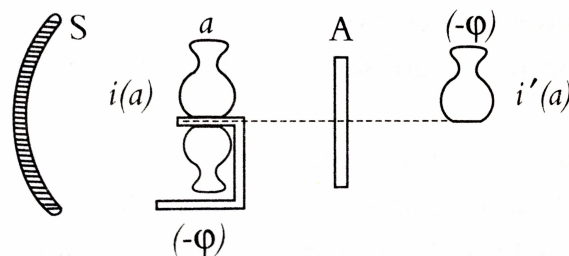
Obviously something of the imaginary is engaged since the game involves appearance and disappearance of something that represents the subject. The



symbolic register is in play as well, since the arbitrariness of the mother's disappearance and reappearance is now regulated by a pair of signifiers that modify the catastrophic absence so that absence is no longer absolute, but is correlative to reappearance. It no longer threatens the subject with total abolishment, but in fact gives rise to the subject, although, to a divided subject.

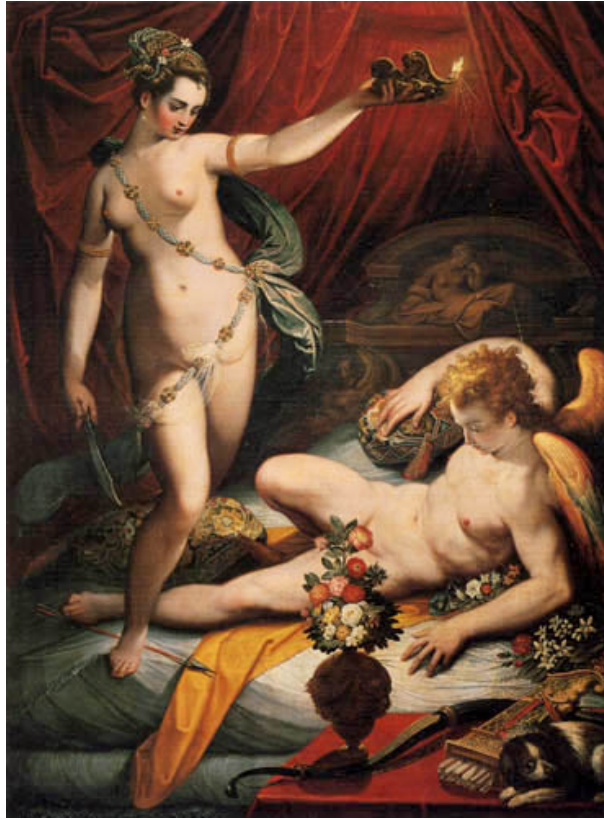
What Lacan was articulating with *object a* is not so much the notion of object or object relations, but object loss. This indicates not merely that any object will be insufficient to satisfy desire, but that object *a* is in itself that insufficiency. Object *a* is not what desire runs after, it is what inaugurates desire. This is due to the fact that once taken up in language, the object is no longer capable of fulfilling a function as object. The object is constructed in language, constructed by the effects of the signifier.

Utilizing the optical schema, Lacan states that the subject could only really have a relation with object *a*, the object of desire, if the subject were really able to be positioned at the place of *I*. This would be the relationship of the phantasm:  $\$ \diamond a$ . However, the subject is not able to occupy that position, since it would be the equivalent of being able to step through the looking glass. Instead the subject is in a relation with the virtual image, which gives the *mirage* of being the image as seen by the Other. The object *a* is not available in the virtual image.



The optical schema appears in the seminar on *Angst* with the flowers in the real image labeled  $a$ , while the flowers in the virtual image are labeled  $(-phi)$ , the imaginary phallus, indicating that  $a$  has no mirror image. As Lacan notes, “[Minus phi] is no more visible, no more palpable, no more presentifiable here [in the neck of the vase in the virtual image] than it is down here [in the neck of the actual vase hidden inside the box], [minus phi] hasn’t entered the imaginary.” (Lacan, 1962- 63. p. 60)

Does this particularly clarify how an object can have no mirror image? Only if one thinks of the flowers that are *not* contained within the hidden real vase as constituting an object. At least, that seems to be Lacan’s intention. In this he is following Freud, who designates the maternal phallus as an object, noting that when it is looked for and it is not seen, it does not cease to exist for the unconscious.



ZUCCHI "Psyche surprising Eros"

In his seminar VIII, *Transference*, Lacan dedicates several sessions to a discussion of a painting by the artist Jacopo Zucchi, entitled "Psyche surprising Cupid." His discussion covers a number of questions, but for our purposes of following the development of the Mirror Stage, I will only highlight a few points. Lacan's interpretation of the theme of the painting is that it represents the relation of the soul to desire. (Lacan, 1960-61. p.128) He distinguishes demand from desire, noting the discordance between the object of demand in the various stages — whether it be the demand of the subject in the oral stage, or the demand of the big Other in the anal stage — and "the place of desire in the [big] Other." Lacan says that this place of desire of the Big Other "will be masked, veiled even though secretly perceived by the archaic, infantile subject." (p.129)

The 'genital phase,' that is supposed to lead to the "Eldorado" of genital love, is connected to the manner in which for whatever demand there could be by the subject, desire is involved. If every phase, as we have seen, has the threat of castration running through it, "[...] the fact is that the organ is not taken up, brought, approached, except as transformed into a signifier and that, because it is transformed into a signifier, it is in this that it is cut off." (p. 130)

Here in this painting we have a bouquet of flowers, prominently and strategically placed to obscure the phallus of Cupid. But, as Lacan points out in his discussion of the painting, if you really look at the painted flowers, the flowers are "not particularly abundant" so that one can observe "precisely there is nothing behind, there is literally no place for the least sexual organ, so that what Psyche is here on the point of cutting literally has already disappeared from the real." (p. 130)

In place of the organ of genital love, the phallus, there is nothing but an absence. This signifier has a place, but it is the place where signification disappears in the Other. In the seminar on *Angst*, Lacan states "There is a remainder under the mode, I am saying, of the phallus. And that means that henceforth, in any imaginary mapping out, the phallus appears in the form of a lack, of a (-phi) In the whole measure that there is realized at *i(a)* something that I called the real image, the constitution in the material of the subject of the image of the body functioning as properly imaginary, that is to say libidized, the phallus appears as a minus, appears as a blank. The phallus no doubt is an operational reserve, but one which is not only not represented at the level of the imaginary but which is circumscribed and, in a word, cut out of the specular image." (Lacan, 2014. p.39)

What does it mean to say that the phallus “*appears* in the form of a lack”?

The phallus, as signifier, signifies the lack that is the structural basis of signification, the lack that structures the relations of all signifiers — including the phallus as signifier: “therefore transposed to a completely different function than its organic function.” (Lacan, 1960-61. p. 131)

The phallus is signification, no other signification than signification itself. The phallus signifies, and establishes, difference. It is an exception, since it is the only signifier that actually signifies something, Lacan having stated that signifiers signify nothing, except their difference from other signifiers. (Lacan, 1961-62. p. 154) As an exception, it proves the rule and as a consequence it is lacking from the signifying chain<sup>3</sup>.

“Let us say that it is the only name which abolishes all other nominations and that it is for that reason that it is unsayable. It is not unsayable because we call it the phallus but one cannot at the same time say the phallus and continue to name other things.” (Lacan, 1961-62. p 154).

It is this relationship of the phallus to the effect of the signifier and the consequences for what is in question in the castration complex, that will be taken up by reconsidering the optical schema.

Lacan points out that this painting with a vase containing a bouquet of flowers anticipates by three and a half centuries his own use of the optical schema of the

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<sup>3</sup> The exception has the function of the primal father from *Totem and Taboo*: his murder establishes the brotherhood (set) of men who are subjected to the rule that all men are castrated. Henceforth men can dream of occupying the place of the exception, but are barred from doing so.

inverted bouquet. Lacan uses this artifact from *Psyche Surprising Cupid* as a kind of “found object” to indicate the place of the absent phallus in the optical schema.

The bouquet in the virtual image in the optical schema, he labeled (-phi) to indicate that, as in the painting, the flowers are covering up an absence.

The bouquet in the “real image” is labeled (*a*), indicating a correlation of these two elements (*a*) → (- phi): *a* that is the support of the function of each *replacement* object, and (-phi) that is the support of the function of castration, which opens a hole at the heart of every relation to the object.

In the locus of the Other, authenticated by the Other, as Lacan reminds us, a mirage is reflected. This image is characterized by the fact that what is called for cannot appear there, and thus desire is at stake — in relation to an absence: precisely, the absence of an image of *a*. In the image Lacan marks the spot where the *a* doesn't appear with a minus sign —minus phi— indicating the libidinal reserve, the aspect that is not invested in the image, but remains invested in the body proper.

“[I]t remains profoundly invested, at the level of the body itself, at the level of primary narcissism, at the level of what is called auto-erotism, at the level of an autistic *jouissance*, *irreducible*, animating in short, remaining there to animate eventually what will intervene as instrument in the relationship to the other, to the other constituted starting from this image of my semblent, to this other who will represent [with] its form and its norms, the image of the body in its seductive function on the one who is the sexual partner.” (Lacan, 1962-3. p. 77)

Lacan distinguishes two sides of objects: one that consists in a symbolic circulation of imaginary objects, created starting from the mirror stage. These are the

objects of contention, exchange, representation. This is the context for Lacan's note to J. Aubry: "The infant *realizes* the presence of what Jacques Lacan designates as the object *a* in the phantasm". The other is founded in the "bad encounter" with a real. These are the object *a*'s, the phallus, anterior to the status of common, socialized, exchangeable objects.

Both object *a* and the phallus are lacking, but the one lack is not without an effect on the other. As we have seen from Lacan's remarks to Dolto, all the stages, oral, anal, etc. with their specific objects are organized, *après-coup* around the fear of castration, thus the phallic instance is in itself already an interpretation of the radical lack expressed by object *a*. The presence of castration in the object is due to the deadly effect of language — deadly in the sense that "the word is the death of the thing."

"The phallic function has absolutely no other meaning than to be what gives the measure of this field to be defined within the demand as the field of desire, and moreover, if you wish, that everything that analytic theory, Freudian doctrine, tells us about this consists precisely in telling us that it is through this when all is said and done that everything is arranged." (Lacan, 1961-62. p. 120)

The intervention of language, the symbolic order represented by the big Other, substitutes a loss for the lack at stake. In confronting the subject with a loss, the subject is also confronted with desire inaugurated by this loss.

This question of something "lost" comes with a particular difficulty: in the imaginary rivalry as articulated in the mirror stage, a "lack" is always balanced by the other's gain, a sacrifice is always made *for* another's benefit. However, there is another

more fundamental loss that psychoanalysis has encountered, a loss for which there is no counterbalancing, mirroring, gain. There is a primary trauma which is at the origin of every speaking being. If this primary trauma does not partake of any balance between loss and gain, nobody exists to take advantage of it, and it is therefore outside the realm of identification. (There is no body with whom to identify.)

Freud sought to address this difficulty in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in attempting to conceptualize non-narcissistic entities in the structure of the psyche. He proposed a “death drive” that opposed the life instinct that could explain the repetition of traumas, nightmares.

In order to clarify this further, we need to continue to follow Lacan’s attempts to articulate this object that he says “literally” has no image in the mirror.

An initial, anecdotal way of approaching the question: if object *a* refers to the gaze, the voice, the breast and feces; we can note that the gaze does not appear in the image: you cannot see your gaze in the mirror and also see your image. The voice doesn’t appear in the image, the image is silent. The breast doesn’t appear in the image, rather the mouth as a cut detached from the breast. And as Alain Vannier once joked, you don’t see the feces, “because they are behind you — you cannot see your backside in the mirror.”

While this gives a certain sense of the issue, we need more substantial grounds to demonstrate Lacan’s contention that object *a* is an object that has no mirror image.

In *The Ego and the Id* Freud makes a very enigmatic remark: “The bodily ego is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface.”



This has several implications. First, Lacan argues that Freud is proposing that the psyche, as opposed to what some readers of Freud believed, is not some sort of organ inside the subject containing various parts with the ego at the surface and the Id and superego buried further below.

With his optical model, Lacan demonstrates that what seems most central and “interior” to the human’s sense of “self” is in fact located outside, in the image of the other. The ego, located outside in the small other, can also stand in opposition to the small other — up to the point of murder — with suicide being perhaps the most successful murder of the small other.

If the ego is a projection, and the psyche is not in the “interior” of the subject, this means that the subject is not an autonomous “individual” among other “individuals,” in which there is a strict delineation between the psyche and the world, but rather the subject of the unconscious emerges in the Other and in language in a relationship structured like a Möbius strip.

As you know, if you trace a line on the surface of a Möbius strip, you discover that it has only one continuous surface. Yet it is possible to designate points on the surface that are apparently on opposite sides of the surface. The subject is comparable to the Möbius strip: the subject is continuous with the field of the Other, and at the same time excluded from the other — in the same manner that two points can be designated as on “opposite” sides of the surface of a Möbius strip, yet in reality are on the same surface and thus continuous with each other. The structure of the Möbius is a function of the symbolic register.

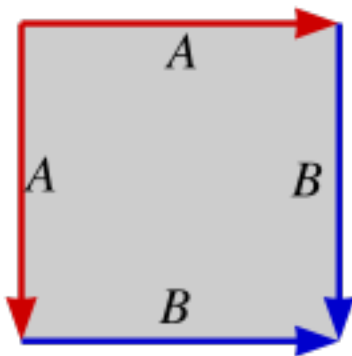
And this brings me to further implications of Freud's remark. As we have seen, Lacan first addresses the term "projection" in the field of optics — taking his cue from Freud's own reliance on an "optical" metaphor for the psychical apparatus.

Keeping in mind that Freud is not constructing a developmental psychology, but something far more radical — the articulation of the structure of the unconscious — Lacan states, in his paper "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation," that "Structure is not form, and we need to learn to think in terms of a topology that is necessitated by structure alone." (Lacan, 2006. p. 544) In this article Lacan is referring to structural linguistics as a topology, or configuration, "necessitated by structure alone." However, this paper is from 1960, the time that Lacan began to utilize geometric topology in his seminar, and his use of topology stems from the necessities of the development of his thought, finding its basis in his reading of Freud. In addition to optics, the reference to the "projection of a surface" also evokes geometric topology, since that is the field that studies the structure of surfaces and spaces. Lacan also notes that the discussion of the formation of the Ego Ideal and the ideal ego, with the usage of terms like "introjection" and "projection," represents identification in spatial terms, "such as a surface or a volume."(Lacan, 1960-61. p.190)

Geometric topology is a field in which the "projection of a surface," to hark back to Freud's words, is a significant operation, with a particular interest in surfaces homologous to the Möbius strip, such as the cross-cap —or projective plane — and the Klein bottle, which all share the characteristic of being surfaces that have only one side. As we have noted, the structure of the subject is that of the Möbius strip, so all of these surfaces with which it is homologous will prove particularly useful to Lacan.

In the topology of surfaces there is no question of what is below, or above the surface, or in the “interior” or “exterior.” While surfaces can be, as topologists say, “embedded” in three dimensional space, surfaces are strictly two dimensional. Since the surface is two dimensional, any surface can be represented by a “fundamental polygon.”<sup>4</sup>

A sphere, for example is represented like this:

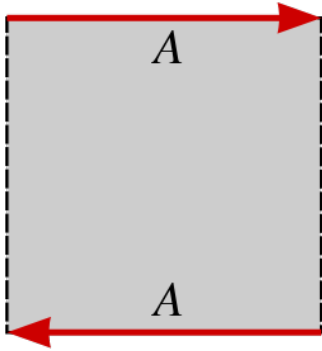


The sides labeled A are joined together, the sides labeled B are joined together and the result has the properties of a sphere. In a clear demonstration of the distinction between structure and form, a cube has the same topological structure as a sphere and thus is represented by the same fundamental polygon, while a cube and a sphere obviously do not share the same three dimensional form.

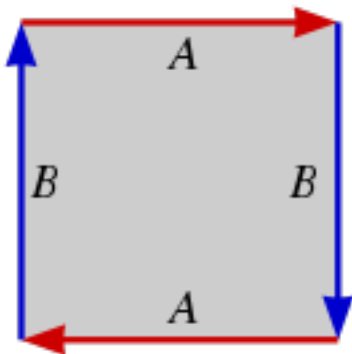
A Möbius strip can be represented as a fundamental polygon in which two opposite sides are joined, while their orientation is not matched. This indicates the necessary single twist when fastening the two ends of a strip of paper to create the Möbius.

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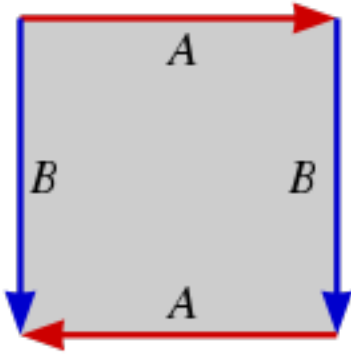
<sup>4</sup> In mathematics, each closed surface in the sense of geometric topology can be constructed from an even-sided oriented polygon, called a fundamental polygon, by pairwise identification of its edges.



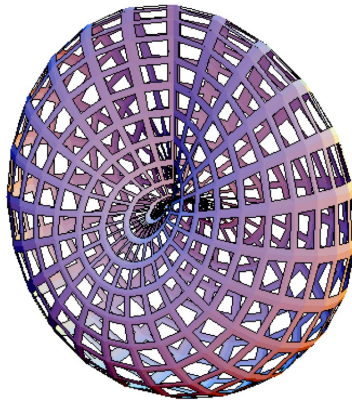
The cross cap is represented as a polygon in which both opposite pairs are joined, and both are given a single twist. While this surface cannot be “embedded” in three dimensional space, it is possible to give a representation of such a surface, and to investigate its properties.



A Klein bottle is essentially a Möbius strip, the edge of which is closed:



Lacan will then work with a cut on the surface of a cross-cap as a metaphor for the operation of the signifier, and for determining the characteristics of the surfaces produced by the cut of the signifier.



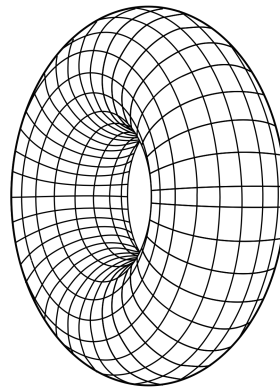
Cross cap

Why a cut? De Saussure imagined language as a vast piece of paper with all the signifiers on one side of a surface and all the signifieds on the other. As you cut the paper, marking differences between one signifier and another, you isolate particular signifier-signified pairs or signs. Lacan, who was not concerned with signifier-signified pairs, focuses on the definition of the signifier as the operation of a cut. The

significance in the cut is that it marks the difference between signifiers. That is why all that signifiers actually signify is difference. If the signifier represents a subject for another signifier, then the subject emerges in the cut (\$) as an effect of language.

Lacan also remarks of the cut:

“That is how *a* is made. It is made like that when any cut whatsoever has occurred, whether it is that of the cord, that of circumcision, and also some others that we still have to designate. . .” (Lacan, 1962-63. p.155)



Torus

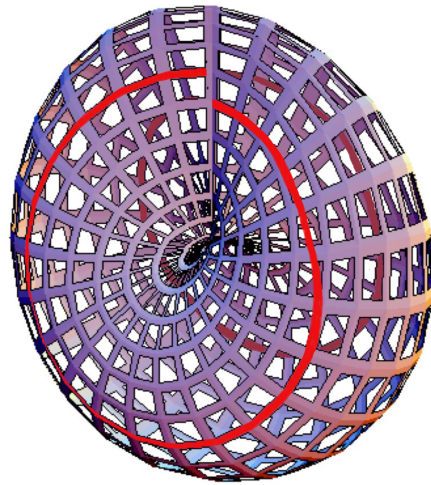
Represented in three dimensional space, the cross cap bears a superficial similarity to a torus, the surface of the body. The surface of the body is literally a torus, organized around the central hole of the digestive system, and metaphorically a torus in that it is organized around a central lack that represents the object of the drives.

A cross-cap resembles a torus, but is homologous to the Möbius strip, it is a single surface in which the interior and exterior are continuous. Like the Möbius, upon

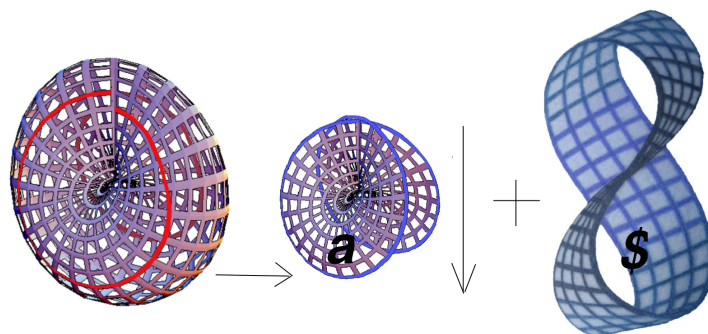
which there are points that are apparently opposite to each other, opposing points can be placed on the surface of the cross-cap that seem to be either inside or outside.

Of interest is the apparent line where the surface intersects itself, but, as Lacan observes, this supposed line is only an effect of representing this surface and is not a fixed line. It indicates the strange property of the continuous surface of the cross cap where it passes through itself. There also appears to be a hole in the center of the cross-cap at the base of this line, but this too is only an effect of representing this surface. It is not a hole, but rather is a “privileged point, everything that is exchanged between one side and the other of the figure, passes here through this false [...] crossing point which makes up the structure.” (Lacan, 1961-62, p. 168) That is, this point supports the possibility of the structure of the surface of the cross cap, since this point is itself nothing other than the intersection of the surface with itself. This privileged point Lacan says, indicates the function of the phallus, “[...] the phallus in so far as it is through the phallus as operator that an object *a* can be put at the same place where in another structure [the torus] we could only grasp the contour.” (p. 169) This point is something other than a hole indicating an absence. Why does this point indicate the function of the phallus?

As we saw earlier, the phallus as signifier is a privileged signifier in that it signifies the structure and functioning of signification. Lacan is linking this to the function that this privileged point on the cross cap has in determining and signifying the structure of the surface of the cross cap. Lacan will isolate this point by introducing a cut [in red], the operation effected by signifiers.



In cutting the surface of the cross-cap, in the manner that the difference between one signifier and another produces a cut on the “surface of language,” Lacan cuts the cross-cap into two parts as a representation of the effect of language in the “birth” of the subject. The cut again follows the path of the edge of a Möbius, the cut operated by the signifier. Of these two parts, one part, the outer one, is a Möbius strip, the subject. The inner part, the “remainder,” represents *object a*.





It is of this inner part that Lacan makes the claim that it “literally” has no image in the mirror. To make this claim, Lacan is utilizing a distinction from topology between surfaces that are orientable and surfaces that are non-orientable.

To hopefully clarify, I will quote Wikipedia:

“[...] the orientation of an ordered basis is a kind of asymmetry that makes a reflection impossible to replicate by means of a simple rotation. Thus, in three dimensions, it is impossible to make the left hand of a human figure into the right hand of the figure by applying a rotation alone, but it is possible to do so by reflecting the figure in a mirror. As a result, in the three-dimensional Euclidean space, the two possible basis orientations are called right-handed and left-handed (or right-chiral and left-chiral).”

Any figure which can be placed before a mirror to produce a reversal of orientation is, quite obviously, called “orientable.” Most surfaces are orientable, even a sphere. This is a bit more complicated, because it is hard to think of the mirror image of a sphere as “reversed.” However, the further definition of “orientable” is (again quoting wikipedia):

“An abstract surface (i.e., a two-dimensional manifold) is orientable if a consistent concept of clockwise rotation can be defined on the surface in a continuous manner. That is to say that a loop going around one way on the surface can never be continuously deformed (without overlapping itself) to a loop going around the opposite way. This turns out to be equivalent to the question of whether the surface contains no subset that is homeomorphic to the Möbius strip. Thus, for surfaces, the Möbius strip may be considered the source of all non-orientability.”

So, a sphere upon which a clockwise loop is traced, placed before a mirror produces the image of a sphere upon which a counter-clockwise loop is being trace. Thus it “reverses” in the mirror.

The remainder of the cross-cap, centered around the “privileged point” and thus homeomorphic to the Möbius strip, is non-orientable. Strictly speaking, Lacan is playing on the definition of “orientable” in order to be able to conceptualize the non-specularity of object *a*. It has no mirror image because in the reversed world of the mirror it has no reversed counter part, so it is not *represented*.

The importance for the imaginary of the fact of reversal in the mirror is something that Lacan noted as early as his article from 1951, *Some Reflections on the Ego*:

“We note that the image in the mirror is reversed, and we may see in this at least a metaphorical representation of the structural reversal we have demonstrated in the ego as the individual’s psychical reality. But, metaphor apart, actual mirror reversals have often been pointed out in Phantom Doubles. (The importance of this phenomenon in suicide was shown by Otto Rank.) Furthermore, we always find the same sort of reversal, if we are on the look-out for it, in those dream images which represent the patient’s ego in its characteristic rôle; that is, as dominated by the narcissistic conflict. So much is this so that we may regard this mirror-reversal as a prerequisite for such an interpretation.” (Lacan, 1953, p.15)

The inner portion of the cross-cap doesn’t reverse in the mirror, doesn’t undergo the “structural reversal” of the ego and thus “literally” does not appear in the mirror *as a reversed mirror image* and thus is not a part of the narcissistic imaginary relation in which the mirrored counterpart is a “pre-requisite.”

The outer portion of the cross-cap, now a Möbius strip, represents the subject. The inner part, Lacan says is object *a* — the part that language does not articulate, the remainder left over after the operation of language which cannot be represented, either by the symbolic or the imaginary.

Lacan says of *object a*, in his Seminar 13, *L'objet de la psychanalyse*:

“That nobody is able to see it, is linked, as we have already indicated, to the very structure of this world in so far as it appears to be coextensive to the world of vision. A fundamental illusion that from the beginning of our discourse we have tried to shake, to refute when all is said and done.

“But that nobody has been able to see it, in the sense that to be able means cannot see it, is no excuse for the fact that no one up to this has been able to conceive of it.” (p. 74)

In this seminar Lacan also states, he says for the first time, that object *a* is of the order of the real.

The difficulty that Lacan encounters with the optical schema is that since it is an image, by definition it masks the real that Lacan is trying to articulate. Lacan notes that there is a double error that occurs in the identification that takes place in the mirror stage. There is the mirage of identification, and also the mis-recognition of what is at the heart of the mirage and that sustains it “real-ly.”

This real is at stake in the specular image: in the optical schema Lacan writes it *i(a)*, indicating: “that there is something other (*qu'il y a quelque chose d'autre*), the (*a*) precisely at the heart of this capture and which is its veritable reason.” (p. 75) The French *il y a quelque chose d'autre* could also be translated as “there is something

else,” but Lacan is indicating not just something additional, but something that is foreign, radically un-assimilable, to the image — “something other.” Yet this something other is “at the heart” of imaginary capture, and in fact is the reason that this capture is effected.

Lacan uses similar phrasing in another reference to the question of the unity of the body of the infant, noting:

“[...] the contrast between this sketch-able thing that is projected in front of [the baby], which attracts him, with which he persists in playing, and this something incomplete [*quelque chose d'incomplet*] which is manifested in his own gestures.”

(Lacan, 1960-61. p. 192)

“Something” in the body has an aspect of the incomplete, yet the body is complete in its parts. Beginning with the seminar on *Angst* Lacan will make clear that the “*quelque chose d'incomplet*” of the body corresponds to something, the object *a*, that is not represented in the mirror.

It is in the mirror stage that, in offering unity, the object *a* is constituted as a lack, and there is in the body “something of the incomplete.” The mirror stage introduces something new, something that *après-coup*, establishes the dis-unity that chronologically preceded the apprehension of the possibility of unity, and that can at certain moments threaten the unity of the image. This is a paradoxical aspect of the mirror stage: if the specular image gives the subject an illusion that he is somehow transparent to himself, and by extension the objects of the world are therefore transparent and knowable, it also establishes the possibility for an angst-provoking disruption that contradicts that transparency and self-knowledge. Because the self-recognition that takes place in the mirror stage is essentially a mis-recognition, there is

always the possibility for the dimension of the strange, of the appearance of an object that is “in no way graspable.[. . .] Before this new thing, the subject literally vacillates and everything is put in question about the so-called primordial relation of the subject to every effect of knowledge.” (Lacan, 1962-3. p. 98)

This “*quelque chose d’incomplet*” will only be masked by the image, deferred by the signifier. This something unknown, the kernel (and basis) of repression, the question of the desire of the Other, this lack that can always reassert itself is also, *après-coup*, established in the mirror stage. It is a loss that the long and “encyclopedic” work of an analysis can allow the subject to assume, in terms of the assumption of desire. If by the assumption of desire, we mean that the loss is given a place as cause of desire.

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