

Esther Mathis
Lucid Ambiguity, 2020

The humanist, architect and art theorist Leon Battista Alberti suggested in 1435 that art should henceforth be placed in an eternal dichotomy between unattainable self-love, deception and self-awareness. For him, the reflection of the self lies at the beginning of all art. If he was right, then this self-awareness would have been rather opaque in the beginning. The history of the mirror is a continuous illumination of reflection, from obsidian, to glass over silver, to razor-thin aluminum alloys. The objects of Esther Mathis intervene in this logic, reversing it. The Age of Enlightenment as a European movement was closely linked to the development of lenses, the microscope and binoculars. Have we seen the world more clearly since then? Mathis questions this. The opaque is here only an apparently paradoxical movement; the darkening, "clouding", serves Mathis as a guide to the lucid.

The oldest mirrors that could be secured archaeologically are over 7000 years old. They were found in Neolithic tombs in Catalhöyük in Turkish Anatolia. Black polished stone, obsidian, actually molten and re-petrified volcanic glass, dark shimmering. Such early reflective objects are not vain utilitarian tools, they are rather light directors, and probably transformed sacred interiors into opaque aureoles, served to communicate with the Other, the transcendent. This dark reflection was shared by early societies in Eurasia, Mesoamerica, and Polynesia.

Even if the details of a face could not be perceived precisely, the outline of the head was still recognizable. If we imagine the interior of a temple or oracle in Chavin, Göbekli Tepe or Efate, illuminated by a directed, diffuse light, the heads of the faithful are shadowy, slowly become clearer over time and merge with the faces in the reflection of the standing water. The question that arises in such a form of self-perception is the one asking about the essence of a person.

The ancient Greek word "prosopon" stands for that which can be seen, i.e. face or visible figure of a human, where the unity of consciousness, thought, will and action finds its expression. Also the origin from the Etruscan "phersu", found as an inscription on a representation of a procession of masked figures, is considered possible. The closeness of the Etruscan meaning mask/ masked figure corresponds with the Latin "per-sonare" (to sound through) and expresses our idea of a person as that which is behind the mask.

It is no wonder then, that Alice had to go behind the mirrors in the second part of her adventures, after the fall through the rabbit hole, where she again finds everything surreally distorted - and thus clearer. The transition from obsidian to the polished surface of bronze or glass remains fragile, the light that shines in reflection from behind the masks questions Plato. Alice meets Dionysus; he dances on the waves and treetops, just out of our field of vision, the incoming light rays of his figure refracted multiple times, through cornea and aqueous humor, lens and vitreous body. He is not a purely Greek god here in the realm of the Opaque, but one of the Mediterranean, united and fused with Osiris. Hesychios brought him from Alexandria to Ethiopia, located him in Egypt, Lycia, Libya, Naxos, India or Macedonia. No wonder that our memory remains

shadowed, like our self-image in a fogged mirror. The gods ultimately dance behind them. The strange attraction, that arises when one looks behind them, has something at once inspiring and frightening. The chambers and layers of our subjective and collective memories are neither fully explored nor completely unknown, neither merely illuminated nor completely recreated, but both at once. However, this very ambiguity is the very definition of the uncanny according to Freud. It is first and foremost the once familiar, the childlike belief in the omnipotence of fantasies and thoughts; the familiar is then repressed, supposedly overcome, superimposed, and hidden in the unconscious.

The rays of light, on which Dionysus dances, extend almost to infinity. If we define parallels as a series of lines that extend in the same direction, are equidistant at all points, and never converge or diverge, then broken parallels are likely to do just the opposite. At some point in space and/or time, they collide and cross each other, creating a small knot, an interaction between two things that by definition should have stayed apart. Those forces of light which we perceive are due to chance as well as to an inner necessity.

We might think of this grid of knots and broken parallels as a quasi-microscopic detail of something much larger, traceable through the lines of art history. Our personal biographies are reflected in imaginary patterns of time, something we like to call memory. As we learned at the beginning of the 20th century, but should have known earlier, memory is only a construction that follows the half-remembered lines of images, smells, and conversations that mark that time of our lives when we stayed awake.

The ray of light of Plato, the heritage of Narcissus according to Leon Battista Alberti, are only half the truth. The insights we can gain in the reflections of Esther Mathis' objects are more contradictory, cloudy and lucid at the same time. The shadows and dark spots are equated with the illuminating and clear. The yin and yang of other cultures has always been a thorn in the side of the European Enlightenment, and it's time we brought the possibilities of the opaque, the fractured, and the multi-perspectival back into our reality with Dionysus. "Lucid Ambiguity" puts the essence of prosopon in the center, bundles the broken parallels of light, like a dioptric apparatus of seeing and thinking.

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