

CHRISTINA VIRAGH What We Overlook

Mirrors can be fatally tautological, as Countess Amelie must have realised in Theodor Fontane's novel *Before the Storm*, when she saw a figure clothed in black in the mirror one evening and died of shock. She had no one to blame but herself. For years she had talked herself and others into believing the myth of the Black Woman, whose appearance she warded off night after night by having her mirror veiled. But one night she forgot and saw the image of her madness coming towards her out of the mirror. Snow White's evil stepmother suffers the same fate, for the mirror thrusts her own incessant thoughts upon her, namely that Snow White is more beautiful than she is. Once again the outcome is fatal.

In aesthetic terms, however, there is something to be said for this brutal finale. It has at least put an end to the endless repetitions and drawn our attention to the blindness of both mirror and beholder. Mirrors reflect everything indiscriminately, and this is exactly what we usually overlook when we use them.

We want to find meaning but are confronted with pure parroting. Even if the mirror tells us that, say, our hair is mussed up (prompted by us, of course), it leaves us in the dark about the influence, if any, that the messy hairdo may have on our attractiveness. The evil and presumably not very bright stepmother doesn't know that either. Like a computer apostle, she thinks the programmed programme objectivises her own subjectivity, i.e. her hate and envy, making them appear universally valid all over the land, and murder the only way out.

In a Hungarian film of the seventies, a peasant woman spends weeks preparing a journey to visit her son in London. Shortly before leaving the house, she takes a stick and smashes the mirror. Maybe she doesn't know about or doesn't believe in the seven years of bad luck that are caused by breaking a mirror; or she may have ideas similar to those of the Countess. She may be trying to prevent the mirror from attracting evil spirits in her absence. Actually it's a pity that she broke it. For once the mirror would have had a chance not to be tautological and to show something that no one else can see. But our mirror logic is all backwards: we don't want to see what's really interesting; we are attracted only by what we already know. And to keep the tautology from falling back on us, we persuade ourselves that there is more behind what we see in the mirror: not only face, hand, chair, lamp, wall, but more meaningful and aesthetically superior reflections. But the opposite is true: the mirror shows us how insignificant these things are. Anything that can be repeated at will has no aesthetic significance. Maybe reflections make sense only when chance comes into play, when a mountain is reflected in a pond, a group of Japanese in a shop window, a sparrow in a chrome steel table leg, or when no one says or asks what – if anything – the connection means.

Capturing these chance connections is an artistic objective that does not go awry only if chance is left intact. That is what such and such a moment was like; that's the way the overhead cables of the streetcar were reflected in my window when I opened it that evening to get the cigarette smoke out of the room, a typical moment, typical inasmuch as it instantly fell apart again, and no gestural attempt to arrest it will be able to turn it into a metaphor. It is symbolic neither of enduring life nor of destructive time; it stands only for itself, wordlessly, with no implications.

One might attempt to repeat this gesture in pictures, words, or music, but repeating the unrepeatable will succeed only if none of these media see themselves as a mirror. On the other hand, if pictures, words, or sounds are able to show us what we are prone to overlook, namely that the configurations of life do not always revolve only around ourselves but are rather in constant motion beyond interpretation and beyond tautology, then they have taught us something that we could never have learned in any other way, and thus they have become: message.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert