NARCISSUS IN TROUBLED WATERS

Francis Bacon Bill Viola Jeff Wall

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Preface

This book questions the received opinion according to which the great myths of classical antiquity have died for good. It proves, in particular, that the beautiful story of Narcissus (whom we have seen, since Leon Battista Alberti, as a figure of pictorial representation), far from succumbing to the pressure of time and the inevitable changes in the notion of art in the contemporary era, has retained, even to this day, all its emblematic value.

Henri de Riedmatten's book deals with the avatars of the myth of Narcissus in contemporary art, and it does so in a subtle and nuanced way. It does not aim to conduct research into iconology, but rather into mediology. An initial chapter demonstrates analytically that the myth of Narcissus, as crystallized in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and discussed by other ancient sources, has, in essence, been a "visual" myth. The story of the young man who falls in love with his own reflection concerns, on the one hand, the medial perception of the reflective surface and, on the other, the relationship between identity and otherness—whence the multiple psychological or even psychoanalytic implications inherent in this myth. Two analyses of images, focused on Caravaggio's *Narcissus* and Nicolas Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* have been conceived as case studies whose aim is to shed light on two different modalities of "visualizing a visual myth." Caravaggio's well-known painting is examined as a deconstruction of the original myth, which "freezes our 'effect of seeing'" by granting a place of privilege to the violence of the moment and the fascination elicited by focalizing on the figure, whereas Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* aims to contain the entire story of Narcissus and Echo within the limits of a painting.

On the strength of this preamble the book then launches into a critique of the Lacanian notion of the "mirror stage." This is a core chapter detailing the importance of Jacques Lacan's approach on the one hand, and on the other, the weak or even obscure as-

pects of his theory. His conclusion emphasizes the fact that the re-elaboration of Freudian narcissism through the Lacanian mirror stage remains at a distance from the myth. Narcissus, as Henri de Riedmatten shows us, never really undergoes the ordeal of narcissism. And yet madness and death resonate in the perception of his specular image.

Once this theoretical basis has been established, the book turns to the "Narcissus effect" in contemporary art, analyzing the work of three significant artists from the 20th and 21st centuries: Francis Bacon, Bill Viola, and Jeff Wall. Implicit in Riedmatten's choice is the conscious focus of his research on three ways of expressing the theme of "narcissism" through different media: painting, video and photography. There are several useful conclusions one can draw here. The discussion of Francis Bacon's art, for example, seen above all in the light of his self-portraits, is based on the Deleuzian notion of "faciality [*visagéité*]" and emphasizes the role played by the mirror within the production scenario as implemented by the English artist.

The chapter devoted to Bill Viola investigates three important cycles of the video director's work: *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1979), *The Passions* (2000), and *Purification* (2005). It is based on a thorough knowledge of the three works in question and the relevant documentation available. Personal contact and conversation with the video artist gave Henri de Riedmatten direct insight into Viola's creative laboratory. Of particular interest are the conclusions regarding the baptismal symbolism of water and the cleansing connotations of tears. This chapter also provides a good example of modern visual research, as conducted by Bill Viola, anchored in the figurative tradition of devotional images.

Finally, the last chapter, through the work of Jeff Wall, examines self-representation and the self-reflexivity of a medium. Here once again the debate with tradition as opened by the Canadian artist is analyzed from every angle. Riedmatten shows us what a work like the pseudo-triptych *Picture for Women* (1979) owes to Manet's last masterpiece, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, which Jeff Wall, significantly, had studied attentively during his stay in London at the beginning of the 1970s. He also shows how the *mise en scène* of this image creates a "balancing act" between transparency and opacity, between the real and illusive presence of the mirror, between the photographic representation of the artist and the mark of the author.

What makes this book a remarkable achievement is the author's ability to combine philosophical reflection and the study of written

sources with the deciphering of the language of images, considered in close relation to the medium. The book proves not only that great myths survive but also that the history of art, far from having used up all its resources, is capable of self-renewal by bringing important answers to the burning questions of present-day artistic creation.

Victor I. Stoichita

1 Introduction

This book will explore the myth of Narcissus from its earliest, ancient origins then, from a medial perspective, study its repercussions on the art of the 20th century.

In the version of the myth that has come down to us from Ovid,[1] Narcissus relates with his reflected image on the surface of the water through a dual process of recognition: the recognition of self, and the recognition of the medial properties of the surface. This process, which can range from a complete ignorance of the presence of a surface up to the recognition of a mirror, constitutes the "poetics of illusion"[2] that underlie the drama with which Narcissus is confronted. Initially he does not recognize himself; he is stunned and fascinated as he contemplates the "other young man" looking back at him, a youth of unprecedented beauty. The illusion is total. Such an illusion, which causes him to fail to recognize his own reflection, is the fruit of his "strange passion,"[3] which Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, has chosen as the instrument with which to inflict her punishment on Narcissus, for spurning love and disdainfully rejecting his many admirers, both men and women.

Eventually Narcissus—not before going through various stages of recognition—will grasp that this "other," whose peerless beauty he has been admiring, is an image—an image of himself—requiring the support of a medium in order to gain access to its visibility.[4] However, even after he has identified his reflection as such, Narcissus' amorous madness persists: tears come to disturb his image on the surface of the water, and his madness will ineluctably lead him to certain death.

The current medial reading of the Ovidian version is in line with the ideas expressed in the work of Rheinart Herzog and Christiane Kruse,[5]

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[1] The Ovidian version of the myth of Narcissus can be found in: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III, 339-510 (*Met*., III). English translation by Anthony S. Kline, in: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, A.S. Kline (ed.), 2004.

[2] This term was taken from the title of the work by P. Hardie, 2002.

[3] *Met*., III, 350 (*novitasque furoris*).

[4] See the definition of the medium according to H. Belting, (2001) 2011, p. 18: "In art historical parlance "medium" is commonly used either of the genre in which an artwork is produced or of the material used by an artist. When I speak of a "medium" however, I am talking about that which conveys or hosts an image, making it visible, turning it into a picture." See also G. Boehm, 1994, pp. 325-343; G. Boehm, 1999, pp. 165-178.

[5] R. Herzog, 1992, pp. 21-23 (My thanks to Christiane Kruse for giving me access to this text). Reinhart Herzog also refers to Karlheinz Stierle, replicating the structure of his *Dreistufenmodell* in: K. Stierle, (1975) 1997, pp. 289-326. Cf. C. Kruse, 1998, pp. 102-103. This article also appeared in a slightly modified and enhanced form as a chapter in: C. Kruse, 2003, pp. 312-313.

while it is also based on the triangular configuration of image – medium (device [*dispositif*]) – gaze (body) proposed by Hans Belting in his plea for "an anthropology of images."[6]

The myth of Narcissus according to Ovid or even the Greek sources—Konon, Pausanias or Philostratus, for example—is fascinating in and of itself: not only does it portray in a primordial way this anthropological perspective with its three parameters, it also simultaneously projects a situation of disturbance and interference that tend, in a way, to contaminate the relationship between each of them. Each of these ancient acceptations of the myth preserves, to varying degrees, the representational kernel engaging Narcissus' perception of the self-image through a medium, while portraying various strategies of illusion that serve to disturb the tripartite relation—sowing confusion, for example, as to the nature of its elements and their interaction.

My approach throughout will be principally of a visual nature. While I aim, through my analysis, to bring to light the instances of illusion that structure this founding myth in each of its variations, it is above all with a view to discussing their expression and reformulation in visual terms, in particular in the work of artists such as Caravaggio or Nicolas Poussin. The myth of Narcissus, moreover, seems to appeal to any form of visual representation—pictorial or other. Indeed, the story itself already brings together the viewer and the illusionist work of art. Just to take one example, Narcissus is fascinated by what Ovid describes as a peerless work of art.[7] As for Philostratus, he has us wander through a gallery of paintings and insists on the homological connection between watery surface and pictorial surface;[8] whereas during the *Quattrocento* the myth was enriched by a new assertion on the part of Leon Battista Alberti: Narcissus is the inventor of painting.[9]

The myth of Narcissus is a cultural archetype, to be found all through Western literature and art history, a myth that is at the origin of a strategy of representation that confronts a person with his or her own image through a medium. It has become paradigmatic of any reflection engaging individuals with their own image in the mirror, and seems, likewise, to be authoritative when it is necessary to consider the relationship of individuals to their image, not only reflected by a mirror but also represented by any other two-dimensional support: the canvas of a painting, a cinematographic screen, or a photographic surface, for example.

My aim throughout this study, by resorting to different examples from the art of the 20th century to the present day, will be

[6] H. Belting, (2001) 2004, p. 9 (Foreword to the French edition): "Therefore I chose another path, by deciding to analyze the image in a so-to-speak triangular configuration, through the relation shared by three distinct parameters: image-medium-gaze or image-device [*dispositif*]-body, for I could not possibly imagine an image without immediately placing it in a close correlation with a gazing body and a medium that is gazed at." [Translation: A. Anderson].

[7] *Met.*, III, 418-426.

[8] Philostratus, *Imagines*, I, 23, pp. 88-89. The title of the collection in Greek is *Eikones: Images.* On the connection between painting and the surface of the water in the *ekphrasis* of the work representing Narcissus, see also Fr. Frontisi-Ducroux, 1980, p. 123.

[9] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, Book II, 26, p. 46: "Things being so, I have taken the habit of saying, among friends, that the inventor of painting was, according to the opinion of the poets, that [famous] Narcissus who was transformed into a flower. As the painting is in fact the flower of all the arts, thus the whole tale of Narcissus perfectly adapts to the topic itself. To paint, in fact, is what else if not to catch with art that surface of the spring?".

to highlight the various *mises en scène* and representational strategies that have their origins in this classical example of the Western tradition, but which reformulate it—particularly as these productions and strategies are both filtered through and enriched by the anthropological concerns peculiar to the context from which they have emerged. Therefore I will start my analysis with the dawn of the 20th century, in order to take a closer look at what was then the nascent science of psychoanalysis; to be more exact, the metamorphosis of Narcissus into a notion—*the Narcissus-like tendency.*[10] This notion starts by describing an excessive form of auto-eroticism, before going on to encounter several shifts that will lead to the Freudian hypothesis of a "normal" narcissism that can be attributed to all human beings.[11] And it is precisely the re-elaboration of Freudian narcissism through the image, as undertaken later by Jacques Lacan—the mirror stage [12]—that will constitute the crux of my study. In particular, I will endeavor to confront the Lacanian mirror stage with the myth of Narcissus, principally in its Ovidian version, and I will also attempt to see to what extent this stage reflects the "full meaning of the myth of Narcissus"—whether this meaning refers to the specular reflection, the illusion of the image, or death, per Lacan's own terms.[13] In the course of this analysis, I will therefore be called on to go deeper into the two Freudian concepts of the death drive—the "suicidal tendency" according to Lacan—and the scopic drive. I will try to evaluate whether instruments like these can, in turn, be said to enrich any hermeneutic undertaking with regard to the myth.

On the strength of the various historical, exegetic, and visual layers covering the myth, I will conduct case studies of the work of three artists, each of whom exemplifies the use of a different, but always two-dimensional artistic medium: painting, video and photography. My study will not seek to be exhaustive, but will focus primarily on exemplarity. This is the result of a deliberate choice, yet it cannot be accused of being incomplete for all that.[14] Indeed, the examples chosen from the oeuvre of these three artists—Francis Bacon, Bill Viola, and Jeff Wall—offer not only a reverberation of the myth and/or its visual instantiations but can, moreover, interact with each other, communicating at times through one artist's explicit reference to another, in such a way that my project is constructed as a coherent thematic circuit.

My purpose therefore will be neither to compile an inventory of those works of art directly incarnating the character of Narcissus, nor to conduct strictly iconographic research, but rather to con-

[10] H. Ellis, 1898, pp. 260-299. Cf. also H. Ellis, (1933) 1948, pp. 114-116.

[11] S. Freud, (1914) 2003, p. 3.

[12] G. Wajcman, 2001, pp. 231-232.

[13] J. Lacan (1938) 2003, p. 21.

[14] V.I. Stoichita, 2008, p. 5.

sider the various *mises en scène* that make use of the myth's specificities in order to render the theme of a "troubled" situation, thus echoing, for example, the different phases of Narcissus' encounter at the spring. "Troubled" may be interpreted here in a number of ways: the troubled surface of the water, of the medium, causing the figure to be distorted, or even the spectator's troubled feelings on discovering how difficult it is to discern what he is seeing in the image (different projections of the artist within the body of his work; presence of an individual and his double in the work; mirror relation between the work and the spectator who gazes at it [painted mirror]; etc.).

Francis Bacon's relation with his mirror image as he created his self-portraits will be the subject of one chapter. The mirror showed him, indeed, the daily effects of dying upon his body—on his face, in particular[15]—which he would invariably try to render on the pictorial surface. To be sure, to undertake in this way the transcription of one's reflected image onto the surface of the canvas is already part of a tradition of self-representation that goes back to the Albertian myth of Narcissus being the inventor of painting. We will however go deeper into the different pictorial expressions of death that are inherent in the face, by situating them in particular in the perspective of a triadic relation that is already part of the myth and is also at work within the Lacanian stage of the mirror: one's own body (face)—the image of one's own body (face) in the mirror—death.

The projection of a watery surface, in a dialogue with the screen-surface, is a recurring element in the work of American video artist Bill Viola. The artist constantly resorts to the reflecting properties of such a surface—particularly to disturb it—within the visual construction of his works. A number of his recent projects, for example, deal with the bodily and above all facial expression of human passions, surpassing the traditional representation of pathos inscribed on the protagonists' faces, through the growing disturbance of the watery surface—whether that surface happens to be a mirror supporting their image, or an obstacle between the screen and the stage where the actors are located. The result is a distortion of their facial features that depicts even more strikingly the emotion that is gripping them. The trouble that is legible on face and surface—especially when it is obtained through tears—with a view to representing human passions even in their most extreme forms can, moreover, be linked, according to Viola himself, to the work of Francis Bacon. Through the manipulation and flow

[15] D. Sylvester, (1987) 2008, Interview 5 (1975), pp. 130-131.

of paint on canvas Bacon was able to imprint suffering on a face or on a body.[16]

The final chapter will be devoted to Canadian photographer Jeff Wall. His artistic production will be analyzed both within the framework of the artist's self-representation on a medial surface—photographic this time—and within the poetics of illusion and the improbable, whose aim is to unsettle the viewer and thus question his or her ability to recognize what the image has to offer, oscillating for example between the real or illusive presence of a mirror. In this context I will also examine the reflexive, self-referential nature of his work, as well as the various ways in which it is exhibited, either within a dialectic between depth and flat surface, or when confronted with an image that seeks to unveil its own production scenario. The link created by the artist between photography and the liquid element will lead to a final staging of the place where Narcissus exhaled his last breath.

[16] B. Viola/H. Belting, 2003, pp. 207-208.