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Maquillage & Semiopticon: An Epistemological Study of Lace & Mirrors

Alphabet Collection

Let us imagine that Imam Quli Khan, the governor of Iran's Fars, Lar, and Bharain provinces in the early 1600s during the Safavid rule, walks through the bazaar of the Multani gold-lace makers, looking at their crafts while accompanied by his advisor. Sometimes the two would play a philosophical game in which Imam Quli Khan would point at an item in the bazaar and ask his advisor to interpret the object as a symbol revealing a deeper truth only a mirror could. Let us then eavesdrop while they converse in front of a textile merchant from Iran's old capital Isfahan.

Imam Quli Khan: "What is the deeper truth of these textiles, my good friend?"

Advisor: "I am delighted to answer, they don't appear as they normally would because they are semi-covered. They are dressed up like you dress up a person. In fact, behind a layer of lace made from gold and silver threads called *Golabatun*, one may dress up the most atrocious truths or incredible falsehoods, as every object placed behind it will acquire a golden luster no matter how badly it is stained. Only by stepping closer and peeking through the holes may one find its obscured nature, but by then it might be too late if they have already committed to purchase the fabric." Imam Quli Khan nodded, and while lifting a beautiful *Noghrehdouz* made with *Golabatoun* reflecting the sun as the moon does at night, he commented: "Such an old-fashioned way of doing business might be exhilarating so long as the buyer's wealth permits, but those who can only afford a single purchase would suffer from a potentially fatal surprise, once the lace is removed."

The advisor replied, smiling: "While I share this important concern with you, we should also consider that a human who has never experienced how appearances can distort the eye

might have difficulty evading a trap that has been placed in their path. On the other hand, a person who is familiar with such tricks will be more secure in a matter of life and death, he will be more likely detecting that a trap has been set by his or her enemies and perhaps also hide this detectability such that nobody will see him or her as threatening enough to merit a trap to begin with. In most traps though, the bait helps to hide the capture device, but there are situations in which the opposite is true, when the bait is hidden behind what captures the prey. The victim's safety in these cases has to do with how quickly they recognize what is drawing them to the trap is their self-image; as if the trap and the prey together form a false mirror in which the victim first must fall before falling into the actual prey. "

Imam Quli Khan: "It should be easy to learn this by merely looking into your reflection that you can see inside a pool of water. At first it seems to work just like a mirror, but once the surface of the water catches the smallest wind, the mirrored face twists into something that merely mocks your naïveté. This is why we should not disallow such a traditional practice of salesmanship as it sharpens the eyes of our city dwellers for even more dangerous situations."

The advisor stopped for a short while as he tried to detect whether Imam Quli Khan was testing him again or not. He replied, "But maybe I can offer a different path for their enlightenment. What if we pay storytellers to perform one lie and a truth bundled into a story, and the person who is able to untangle them and discern between the lie and the truth gets a golden coin?"

Imam Quli Khan: "I see that my own laced sentence that is woven before you has been dismantled and you have found the mirror of truth underneath. Yes, let us make such an annual event in the marketplace, it will do the people of this city good."

Upstairs in the exhibit's three rooms hang several groups of framed photographs (Various titles, 2019) wrapped in stretched lace. Starting with documentary style colour prints of a ballet school in Vancouver named Goh Ballet Academy, whose transliterated name in Farsi

equates “Shit Yes Academy”, and ending with scenes from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, these pictures either directly or through mediation signify feces or its representation. In every room, the wrapping tempts visitors to linger on and peek through the holes in order to recognize the pictures’ content. The distance between the lace which covers the glass frames and the actual pictures creates a coordinating space with the movement of the visitors’ bodies, encouraging movement as a way of seeing more of the pictures.

The only work upstairs that is not covered by lace is a framed small steel sculpture cut from a rusty piece of metal (*Untitled, ShitGoldShit*, 2019) whose shape follows the “overhead-view” of the gold market located across the street from the Ag galerie. As the visitors reach the end of their visit to the upstairs gallery and head downstairs, they begin to notice other elements of the exhibit occupying unusual parts of the building. For instance, the light emanating from the lounge attracts them to the large light box (*Untitled, Public Eye Private Nose*, 2019) illuminating the aerial photograph of Tehran featuring the area around the gallery and the gold market across from it, helping them understand the steel sculpture upstairs. Here the element of scale does the job of both relating the two works and bind them in a mathematical correlation, as if the precious metal upstairs has the ability to hold the value of real properties like land and buildings.

The light box is leaned against the wall on the immediate right of the window through which the visitors can look out to the courtyard. Unaware of the fact that the window is a one-way mirror, they begin to wonder why others in the courtyard stand in the window frame and stare inside or why some of them take out their mobile phones to take a picture of the window. Curious about the opposite view of the window, the visitors head outside and become aware of the trick to which they have been subjected by the artwork (*Untitled, One Way Mirror to the Communal Room*, 2019).

In the middle of the courtyard, Ahadi has erected a diagonal barrier made from the same black lace, taller than humans, which covers the works in the upstairs gallery, splitting the courtyard into two halves. The lace screen also splits the visitors depending on which side of

it they have chosen to be once exiting the building into the courtyard. Regardless, they are able see one another or the gallery's building through the lace holes, remembering the similar visual experience they previously had while looking at the works upstairs.

The exhibition comes into more focus if the visitors go to the bathroom where a series of mirrors (*Untitled, It is closer to you than It appears*, 2019) eerily reveal to them their genitalia and the processes of urinating and/or defecating. Outside, a series of tall poles and black rope made from stretching strips of lace (*Untitled, Territory of the Semiotic*, 2019) demarcates the gallery's building and courtyard by literally separating the space from the rest of the city but particularly the gold exchange operations across the street.

Next to the exit door upon leaving the gallery, there hangs a single framed photograph covered in black lace (*Untitled, After Fox Talbot*, 2019), featuring a black and white photograph of a well-known photogram by William Fox Talbot's *Lace, Plate XX* (1844) made from the exposure of light to a sensitive plate covered directly with piece of lace. This last work acts both as a postscript and the historical clue for understanding of the entire exhibit.

LACE

In its everyday use, lace rarely functions as camouflage, but more as a socially acceptable means for affecting visual distance, as protection or a partially transparent means of concealment. Wearing lace on one's face might signify a desire to communicate mystery, shame, or even aloofness. To partially cover something so it cannot be properly seen and thus understood has wide-ranging implications. The phenomenon traverses religious rites, military tactics, electoral and legislative strategies, marketing campaigns, and any domain in which humans implement phenomenological barriers to effect asymmetrical distributions of perception, action, resources, and, ultimately, power. There are some who are able to update their first impressions of a situation or an object with inferences derived by coordinating what at first appear as epiphenomenal and sensory details. They do this through drawing conjectures about the likely source of a deception and its intended function. They can somewhat successfully transcend the illusions through a self-reflective stance, tracing their

initial impressions to the device which is misinforming their perception; only they stand a chance to mitigate or invert the asymmetry between appearance and essence and evade the deception. In all of its shades and forms, camouflage is a politicized mythopoesis of primitive origin as it is practiced not only by animals hiding from predator or prey, but also by humans who attempt to make their tactics or ultimate aims hidden from enemies and rivals alike. However, what Ahadi distinguishes in Goh Ballet Academy is a particular form of this natural phenomenon and social practice with his use of lace as both physical and metaphysical material.

For Ahadi, lace also alludes to another historical marker—ballet's role as an explicit space of eroticism and an implicit underworld of prostitution in the 19th century Europe as the birthplace of industrialization and photography. White lace strewn across the ballerina's body hides only a bit of her legs, protecting the most sensitive or erotically charged flesh. It also prefigures her sexual potential after the show while indexing ballet itself as a kind of social lace, a custom in which women choreograph their bodies circumspectly so as to covertly advertise decidedly less circumspect movements available later.

Hiding parts of the human body has a direct erotic effect since the brain can then use that which is hidden as a canvas to co-construct a picture with what's given to fit to the innermost desires of the person. By hiding the desired part but letting the mind wander from reality to the land of its deepest desires and wishes, the brain is able to supplant the hidden object and make it into a symbol of its deepest desires. Like a chameleon that reacts to its surroundings, the world is reconstructed by its viewers. It could be labeled as a countercurrent to the human desire to create a reproduction of reality, an anti-mimesis of sorts that recreates phantasies and dreams, in reality, acting as a layer that not only covers experience but also leads the senses to overwrite the real.

It is easy to be fooled by a misleading first impression since it often constitutes the perception of an object. On the other hand, for many readers of a text, the first impression would remain the last. The tension between the semiotics of pictures versus text charges Ahadi's exhibition when considering the work's titles after seeing the works.

Untitled, After Fox Talbot refers to William Henry Fox Talbot and his 1845 photogram of a rectangular piece of floral lace which is housed in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. An accomplished scholar in mathematics, botany, and science, Talbot is also the inventor of negative-positive photographic process. According to MoMA, to produce his picture, Talbot placed a piece of lace on his newly invented light sensitive paper, allowing sunlight to gradually fix its exact negative image, “down to the smallest fold or imperfection.”ⁱ Although the lace used in Talbot’s photograph was hand-made. However, in the 19th century, the technological advancement in lace-production had reached a level at which it became difficult to differentiate between hand-made and machine-made lace, making Talbot’s photograph a visual forecast of the mechanization of the process of lacemaking. Thus, the human dilemma of distinguishing genuine lace from its machinic copy by expert human eyes emerged long before Alan Turing proposed the Turing test as a method for differentiating between a human and machine. What is common between these two examples is how at the level of intersubjective perceptual consensus, the borders between the machines and humans have been warping and wafting for a long while. Never mind that machine-made lace was becoming so much more detailed and aesthetically convincing that not only it entered the luxury market, but that is also surpassed lace made by humans.

Historically speaking, the early computers designed (but never produced) by Charles Babbage belong to the space between the dawn of the industrial revolution and mechanized weaving looms and, later on, the invention of photography. Highlighting the links between weaving, industrialization, computation and photography is the little fact that Babbage, who had a particular interest in textiles and drew inspiration in his work from the techniques deployed by the textile industry, also owned a silk portrait of Joseph Marie Jacquard, the inventor of the Jacquard loomⁱⁱ. In this respect, if lace primitively heralds a contemporary world mediated by pixelation, the lace-making loom prefigures a world fabricated by computationally-driven manufacturing of objects and images. It is no coincidence that Ada Lovelace, the first computer programmer who wrote both poetry and code for Babbage’s machines famously described the way his Analytical Engine “weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves.”

Mirrors

Mirrors are not ordinary reflective surfaces. In addition to their function as a physical tool, not only do they stand for the idea of unmediated truth, but they also point to the metaphysical process of reflection. Philosophy as the human mind's two windows to nature and the nature of being often has been compared to a mirror. Not only mirrors foreshadowed the emergence of photography but also after the arrival of the medium, they acted as its double all the while fulfilling their traditional metaphysical duties by lending it to photographs. This is why it is not farfetched to propose that mirrors are the missing link in media history somewhere between paintings and digital screens.

Technically speaking, a mirror is a surface with a roughness smaller than the wavelength of the light that hits it. This technical definition applies to darker and less detailed mirrors historically made out of polished stones as well as what we call a glass mirror today. Meanwhile, transparent glass mirrors larger than a small saucer were invented much later, and, surprisingly, in Venice's Morano district, not that much earlier and not that far from Florence when the idea of optical perspective (already mathematically theorized by Alhazen in Baghdad around 1000 AD) was applied to painting and architecture by Filippo Brunelleschi as the accurate algorithm for observing and representing the world. Transparent and large mirrors emerged as a rival to the art of painting and the need for humans to accurately represent the world.ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike paintings, mirrors had the power to increase the light source, adding brightness by doubling the daylight or candlelight which an interior space could contain, of course for those who could afford an expensive and luxury item like a mirror. In the early 16th century, a high-quality framed Venetian mirror was more expensive than a painting by Raphael: while the mirror cost 8,000 pounds, the painting was only worth only 3,000^{iv}. Around the same time, the rivalry over the glass and mirror industry in Europe was such that France would routinely offer hefty compensation to lure Venetian glass blowers and mirror makers to resettle in France while Venice would go to wild extents to protect the secrets of its trade by organizing assassination attempts to murder glassmakers who had left to work for competing factories elsewhere^v. Mirrors were also met with economic restrictions due to how their high demand placed constraints on European economies. To prevent the flight of currency due to the high price and demand for mirrors,

the Republic of Geneva enacted a law in which households were prohibited “from having more than one mirror in each room and from having any in excess of thirty-two inches in height.” According to Melchior-Bonnet, by the 18th century mirrors had totally overtaken interior design, supplanting tapestries and paintings to the point that contemporary art critic La Font de Saint-Yenne lamented what he called the “disastrous blow that mirrors delivered to historical painting^{vi}”.

One way to understand the historical shift from an image of the world mediated by artists via painting to the world’s auto-image is to reread Valesquez’ *Les Meninas* painting as a site for situating this shift: while the ancient image regime is busy picturing the sovereign power in a painting, the sovereign itself already sees his true image not in the painting which is being made of him in front of his eyes, but in the mirror in the back of the room reflecting his image more realistically than any painting could.

Against the prevalence of mirrors as the source of light and self-image stands the traditional prohibitions against this technology, adding to what we know about the social function of mirrors. There is a long history of different cultures defacing mirrors by turning them to face the wall, hanging a cloth or painting black over them, when dealing with death or mourning. The former practice is prevalent amongst Indian Muslims in order to avoid doubling the loss and the latter is part of the Judeo Christian tradition by helping to forget oneself and instead only think about the lost member of the family or community.

French philosopher Françoise Laruelle goes as far as anachronistically identifying the essence of philosophy as being photographic. Combining this with Lacan’s insight on the role of mirrors in psychological development of humans, and Wilfred Sellars’ concept of the “manifest image” of humans in the world bound by our phenomenological horizon, it is not hard to see how not only the development of the ego as the self-conscious component of subjectivity—what defines who we are—but also epistemology or how we come to know what we think we know. When we look at ourselves, we split into two, very much like we are in front of a mirror. But when we look at a mirror, we turn into three. If looking at the world creates its plutonian double, suffice to say that our interaction with mirrors separates and

produces two other versions of ourselves as humans-in-the-world. This process can get infinitely doubled up with the help of physical technologies like photography or epistemological tools like philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Photo-Fiction

Between the revealing qualities of mirrors and the obfuscating function of lace sits photography as a mediation between the two, part revealing and part obscuring. The movement of photography in the 21st century has only highlighted its contradictory double duty.

Perhaps the liminality of being subject to seeing and being seen is where the metaphysics of Goh *Ballet Academy (Shit Yes Academy)*, Ali Ahadi's comprehensive installation at Tehran's Ag Galerie, lies. By visiting the exhibition, viewers enter a cohesive world made of images, objects, and text whose goal is to function as spatial philosophy. GBA is an explicitly marked zone of contemplation in time and space where the production of artworks and their careful placement, as good art always does, proposes a new metaphysics of being and language as subjected to seeing and being seen. The work as a whole awakens a range of reflections without necessarily resorting to lengthy and cumbersome textual descriptions. By transforming the gallery into a theoretical laboratory for testing existing philosophical assumptions and his own new hypotheses, Ahadi's installation revisits the contradictory and at the same time intense concepts of panopticon and camouflage. The former is approached as an observation system in a carceral setting which at the same time keeps its subjects aware of its operation, and the latter as the war technology of hiding in the presumed natural setting. In the process, the work discovers the concepts' subtler yet equally powerful siblings in the everyday practices of seeing, navigating, and being in the world mediated by language. From the position of the viewers/subjects, the resulting configuration reveals their unstable position of the subject in flux, pulled by the gravity of diametrically opposed categories of being and language, as well as seeing and being seen.

To sequence its unfolding, Ahadi strategizes his installation around the gallery's architectural specificities, arranging the exhibition as a cognitive labyrinth based on the presumed sequence of the audience's movement in the space. This setup is essential to the operation of the work; it is not unlike interactive and participatory forms of theatre in which the audience takes an active role in producing the play. Except in Ahadi's case, which considering the exhibit's name can be re-categorized as a ballet, the visitors are increasingly encouraged to abandon their role as cognitive walk-through visitors and become actual dancers in the play. Only then their physical experience can become the empirical and concrete proof of the exhibition's philosophical insights.

Visitors to Ahadi's solo exhibition are at once objects and subjects of reflection. Part voyeur and part spectacle, they have a chance to examine the exhibit's assertions by going through the space room after room. It is safe to say that almost every component of the exhibit is visually filtered through either lace or mirror, making its dual technological function as what we call *maquillage* and *semiopticon*. We use *maquillage* not exactly in its French meaning as makeup but as a form of self-conscious and open camouflage which both obscures and aestheticizes its subject. By *semiopticon*, we refer to devices or technologies that their surveilling power depends on how they interobjectively manipulate perception or subject "perception-at-large" to fixed and irremovable conditions.^{vii} In addition to the essential quality of the panopticon, namely how it keeps the subjects of surveillance aware of the operation, the semiopticon generalizes the surveillance, and by so doing makes it also appealing and even voluntary. On the other hand, *maquillage* functions by catching those exposed to it off-guard, subjecting everyone, equally and knowingly, to the alluring gaze of aesthetics. In GBA, the function of lace and mirror requires the viewers to visually decipher that one is reciprocating to the semi-surveillance function of the screen which openly obscures reality in the name of improving viewing pleasure. In other words, while the titivating function of lace is passive-objective—it is unintentional and built into its fabric as an object—the quasi-surveillance function of mirrors is only interobjective and thus must be activated collectively.

Let us imagine a laced mirror, a combination of maquillage and semiopticon. Such a hybrid between the powers of revelation and obfuscation will both trick humans as well as give them a sense of clarity. If the lace has a reflective surface like mirrors, the image would be two-fold containing two reflections: the one off the lace, depending on its current position, and the other from the mirror itself. In this situation, the mirror's attempts to reflect is sabotaged by the mirrored lace, becoming a permanent reminder of the process of reflection. If we take away the mirrored lace, the reflection would still be complete, whereas if we take the mirrored lace alone to a black wall, we would both see the parts of the wall that are visible through the holes as well as the parts of the wall reflected in the intricate patterns of lace. The true enigma of epistemology is similar to looking at a mirror covered with a mirrored lace. Such hybrid between maquillage and semiopticon is a true function of all epistemic machine as it requires the viewer to go beyond the prima facie presented by one singular mirroring, teaching them to filter the mere visual input through an epistemic filter—their brain.

ⁱ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/46340>

ⁱⁱ. Jacquard loom is one of the earliest weaving machine for implementing textile designs in which rows of holes punched into cards sequenced according to rows of stitching along the loom, coordinated the production of a particular textile design.

ⁱⁱⁱ. See Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror, A History*, (New York: Routledge, 2011) 30.

^{iv}. *Lo Specchio et il Doppio* (Milan: Fabbri, 1987), p. 95.

^v. Melchior-Bonnet, 34.

^{vi}. *Ibid*, 81.

vii. According to the Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology, Interobjectivity accounts for, “the non-conscious engagement in the course of social interaction that occurs within a social field that is phenomenally objective for subjects and that includes interactions with objects. The concept relies on a phenomenological distinction between things in themselves and things as perceived and experienced by human subjects that is contingent on cultural objectifications and social practices.” See: Sammut G., Moghaddam F. (2014) Interobjectivity. In: Teo T. (eds) Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology. Springer, New York, NY.