



## Looking at oneself in the mirror of the others. Modelisation and implications of a study on human flexivity starting from semiotics and psychoanalysis

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### Abstract

The mirror is a very widespread tool in human life. It works as an optical device that recreates the image of an object placed in front of it. The relation of the human being with the mirror is very important: we find a pervasiveness and diffusion of mirrors in everyday life, but also in stories and legends, in folklore and mythology. At a certain step of his development, the child is able to recognise himself in the reflected image of a mirror. We observe a strong cultural intra-subjective and inter-subjective recursivity in the construction of the mirroring experience as a model of truth and lie, identity and otherness, knowledge and ignorance. Starting from the debate between two semioticians – Umberto Eco and Juri Lotman – on the semiotic value of the mirror, the authors develop the topic of reflexivity as a psychic process by examining it in the light of various psychoanalytic contributions. Reflexivity and the psychodynamic relationship with one's own reflected image are

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85

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developed by centralising the importance of an ongoing and deeply dialogic process between identity and otherness, continuity and transformation.

**Keywords:** Reflexivity, Mirror, Identity/Otherness, Continuity/Discontinuity, Semiotics, Psychoanalysis.

## Introduction

The mirror is a tool that the human being uses for the reflective capacity of its smooth and shiny surface. Its uses are common and widespread throughout the world in all eras. People use mirrors in their daily lives. Our everyday life is so imbued with mirrors that we hardly notice their omnipresence. Yet the mirror's success and appeal go far beyond its ease of distribution and convenience. In every culture and time, the mirror is a vehicle for a repertoire of symbolic meanings, mythological references, rituals, superstitions, hopes and fears for the human being. It allows the doubling of one's image, the recognition of one's face and identity, and the possibility of looking at a parallel virtual world beyond the reflecting surface. A mirror also allows you to look in places where your gaze cannot reach, allowing you to meet the blind spot of your perspective, that is, to look at yourself while you are looking somewhere else. Thus, all these prospective possibilities acquire great value in the epistemic experience of the human being, generating great enthusiasm and hope but also fears, alarms and anxieties. Folklore is full of superstitions, legends and myths about the mirror (Frazer, 1994; Baltrušaitis, 1978; Di Nola, 1993).

Cultural processes of sensemaking about mirroring have many simultaneous, ambivalent and complementary values. Indeed, a mirror offers several models for the human intra-inter-subjective experience:

- A model of *truth* (looking at oneself) or *lying* (deceiving oneself).
- A model of *identity* (recognising oneself) or *difference/otherness* (the figure of the double, the uncanny, the twin).
- A model of *knowledge* (knowing how to look) and *ignorance* (illusion).
- A model of *reality* (the mirror that reflects what exists) or *fiction* (the mirror reflects non-existent things).

Interest, fascination and fear in legends and stories take the forms

of shattered mirrors, magical talking mirrors, mirrors as doors to other worlds, as duplicators of one's person and as robbers of one's identity<sup>1</sup>. All these show us the relevance of this object and its symbolic value for the human being. Mirrors and their functions represent and grasp the specificity of some psychic and relational processes.

It has always been emphasised how the activity of thinking that knows itself is an activity of reflection, that is, the folding of the same activity on itself – the Latin root of the verb “to reflect” is *reflectĕre*, composed of *re-* (“again”) and *flectĕre* (“to bend”). In physics and optics, reflection indicates the phenomenon whereby a propagating wave changes direction when it hits an obstacle. The obstacle represents a change in the interface of the propagation medium. When the collision between the wave and the obstacle occurs, part of the energy of the incident wave is returned, while the remainder penetrates the medium and is deflected and propagated in the form of refracted waves (so-called “refraction”).

The mirror and its reflective processes have always been treated as metaphors of thought:

Reflection and speculation are the ‘names of thought’ in which, especially since the modern era, an ancient ‘sleeping metaphor’ has been hidden, that metaphor of the mirror that the decline of the organisation of pre-classical knowledge has delivered in full to the complex strategies of the subject. The fortune of this metaphor is due to the fact that, whatever its form or function or use, the mirror is always a prodigy where reality and illusion touch and merge. Its first effect was to reveal one's image to the human being. Physical and moral revelation, which fascinated the philosophers. Socrates and Seneca recommended the mirror as a tool for knowing oneself; the mirror is the

<sup>1</sup> A quite widespread superstition all over the world involves overturning or veiling mirrors in the room with the body of the just-deceased in order to prevent his soul, wandering around his corpse in the immediate hours after death, from being trapped by the mirror. Anthropology emphasises in this practice the survival of an animistic culture and practice. The spectre and the mirror share the same Latin etymology: *spectrum* and *specula* (Di Nola, 1993). It is interesting to deal with this important anthropological-cultural clue from a psychodynamic point of view. The idea that the soul of the deceased, his *imago*, remains trapped in a mirror has a strong link with the melancholy process in which the image of the object – the shadow of the object (Freud, 1917) – can cover the ego of those who go through the experience of mourning.

attribute of Prudence and embodies Wisdom. A single word expresses the reflection that takes place in thought and in the mirror. Image of an image, simulacrum detached from the body and made visible on a screen, alter ego, ghost, double of the subject who shares its destiny, the reflection and its object would be indissolubly united by mystical bonds, and always their absolute identity seemed to depend on a miracle that no artist has ever managed to equal. However, this miracle must not make us forget the ambiguous nature of the mirror: a hieroglyph of truth, it is in fact also a hieroglyph of falsehood. Multiplied, differently arranged or otherwise bent, it changes the appearances of life that unravels and reforms itself, totally freeing itself from its measures and its equilibrium (Tagliagambe, 2011, pp. 235–236, our translation from Italian).

On YouTube, one can find many videos of sadistic jokes that stage situations in which an alleged mirror no longer reflects one's own image. With a background of recorded laughter that should induce and trigger the spectator's amusement, it is possible to see the anguish and terror painted on the face of the victim. Losing one's reflected image<sup>2</sup>, losing one's identity, not recognising oneself in the mirror implies crossing an area of liminality (De Luca Picione, 2017a; 2017b, 2021c; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017), where a distressing feeling and the fear of being lost become very intense.

During a session, a patient (of one of us) told of a dream in exactly these terms: the night before an important final exam to pass to a higher-level school, faced with this important change in his life, in his dream he felt the anguish of no longer being able to find himself in a mirror.

The Jungian analyst Aldo Carotenuto conducted a symbolic study of the many horrifying figures and masks in folklore and fantastic literature (Carotenuto, 1997). He defines the vampire, who is not reflected in the mirror and has no shadow, as an unconscious fantasy of undifferentiation, the lack of a plan of separation, of autonomy (think also of the parasitic alimentary aspect of sucking the blood of victims), as an existence suspended between life and death.

<sup>2</sup> Here we are not referring to *prosopagnosia*, or *prosopoagnosia*, which is instead a cognitive-perceptual deficit. Such a deficit makes the individual unable to recognize the faces of known people and, sometimes, even his own face, when he looks in the mirror or observes his pictures.

The reflecting of yourself in the mirror involve a series of processes of psychic development relevant to fundamental aspects of each person's psychic life: the relationship between subjectivity and otherness, identity and difference, truth and deception, totality and partiality, necessity and possibility, and knowledge of objects and the world and oneself.

In previous works, we have discussed in depth some possible declinations and developments of reflective processes (De Luca Picione, 2015a, 2019; Freda, De Luca Picione & Esposito, 2015; Esposito, Freda & De Luca Picione, 2016), distinguishing two different levels of complexity. We have proposed that *reflection* is a recognition of the individual's own image, while *reflexivity* is a psychological, recursive process focused on the representation of relational processes starting from different subjective positions in the becoming of time. Different subjective positions are expressions of pre-reflective consciousness, a constitutive part of the reflective dimension. Reflection and pre-reflection are not separable dimensions of consciousness (Scalabrini *et al.*, 2022). For example, the pre-reflective experience of emotions allows them to become objects of reflection, and the pre-reflective experience of time allows it to become an object of reflection. It is the importance of pre-reflective experiences that, at a later moment, become objects of reflection. In synthesis, pre-reflexivity, reflection and reflexivity are integrated into the evolution of time (Fossa & Pacheco, 2022).

However, this possibility must not be considered an innate species-specific capacity of the human being but rather a process made possible by the mediation of semiotic devices (signs and language *in primis*) and their acquisition through social practices within symbolic universes. That is, the construction of reflexivity starts from the intersubjective and dialogic experience with otherness: I come to define myself and recognise myself (in a partial and never definitive way!) by starting with the other (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2022a/in press, 2022b/in press). Although the new scientific creed aims to recognise the value of intersubjectivity in the development of reflexivity by noting the importance of caregivers and other significant figures in the processes of mirroring and reflection, nevertheless, it seems that reflexivity is reduced to a sort of recognition of the mind and its intentions. Think of the development of the notion of *mentalization* or of neuroscientific research on *mirror neurons*, where perhaps it is no

coincidence that suggestive references to the mirror, specularity and reflection are so central. Let us consider brief definitions.

Mentalization is the ability to see and understand the self and others in terms of mental states, such as feelings, beliefs, intentions and desires. Mentalization deals with the ability to think and reflect on the self and the behaviour of others (Bateman & Fonagy, 2012; Fonagy & Target, 1997). This ability develops from the first interaction with caregivers (Schimmenti & Bifulco, 2015; Schimmenti & Caretti, 2014) and has profoundly intersubjective and interpersonal characteristics (Mucci & Scalabrini, 2021) that are interconnected with mirroring processes. The “reflective functions” (at the basis of the mentalization construct) include a self-reflective component and an interpersonal component, which together provide the ability to distinguish both internal or intrapsychic realities and external or interpsychic ones (Santoro *et al.*, 2021).

The term «mirror neurons» (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004; Gallese, Migone & Eagle, 2006) indicates the brain neurons whose function is to link oneself with others. These neurons were originally discovered in monkeys. In humans, they were initially identified in specific areas of the brain but were recently found to relate in a much more extensive and transversal way to multiple cognitive functions. Mirror neurons have a double characteristic that makes them especially interesting: on the one hand, they are activated when the subject performs an action, for example, picking up an object; on the other hand, they are activated in a similar way when the subject sees another individual doing the same action. This means that an action, whether performed by the subject himself or observed in another person, activates the same neurons. The same phenomenon seems to occur with emotions, which are both directly experienced and observed in others. For this reason, it is increasingly argued that mirror neurons represent great scientific promise for the future. They are expected to lead to the understanding of the neuro-anatomical and neuro-physiological processes underlying intersubjectivity, imitation and empathy (and also of language, since some hypotheses address the search for the connection between the sense-motor embodied matrix and the acquisition of language itself).

The possible developments of this research about mentalization and mirror neurons are extremely interesting, yet the question arises of which idea of the mind is involved in these reflexive processes (Carli,

Donatiello & Leoni, 2021). The mind, in fact, seems to be reified in its quality of recognisable, identifiable and circumscribable intentional states, namely as something to be known “as it is” or “as it is in its various degrees of development”. Taking up the “specular epistemic model”, we would say that the mirror (or rather a modelling, in specular terms) refers to an identity definition of the reflected object. “My” mind and “your” mind (i.e., the “other’s” mind) become entities to be discovered. This necessarily implies the risk of losing the consideration of less evident aspects, namely, that the mind is also a process of reciprocal and recursive dialogic construction, a contextual and contingent process, in constant evolution and always instantiated within symbolic-cultural frames (Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; De Luca Picione, 2015a; Valsiner 2007, 2014; Neuman, 2003, 2008; Lauro Grotto, 2021).

The purpose of this work is to continue developing the premises for a semiotic and psychodynamic model of reflexivity, starting from some considerations (from different disciplinary areas) on the mirror, its functions and characteristics. Starting from semiotic, cultural psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives, we will highlight how reflexivity is a psychic process whose main activity of *thinking back on yourself* does not constitute a closed and determined circuit nor a function of exact correspondence between the representation and the object. Rather, it is a psychic process whose features are openness, recursivity, unsaturation and endlessness. Therefore, it implies that reflexivity is never completely conscious. From our perspective, there is no dichotomy between reflexivity and pre-reflexivity. Rather, the experience of consciousness is an overlap or interconnection between the reflective and pre-reflective dimensions of consciousness. That allows it not to be a closed, static and determined process in the temporal dimension. Consciousness, reflective and pre-reflective, unfolds in a constant temporal experience. Consciousness unfolds its intentionality to the present (as an object of perception and reflection) but also to the past, moving away from the necessary dependence and independence of that intentionality. The dependence of consciousness in relation to intentionality “towards the past” allows us the experience of continuity in time, of always being the same; but the independence of consciousness from the intentionality “towards the past” is what allows us the emergence of novelty and an always-new present (Fossa & Sanhueza, 2022).

## The Semiotic Debate on the Mirror: Umberto Eco versus Yuri Lotman and the Tartu School

Two important works have tackled careful semiotic examinations of the characteristics of the mirror: Umberto Eco's essay "Mirrors" (1984) and the special issue of the journal *Trudy po znakovym sisteman*, Vol. XXII (1988), edited by Yuri Lotman and his "Semiotic School of Tartu". It is worthwhile to read these works together since their debate helps us understand the complexity of the mirror and its multiple values. They prevent us from the error of identifying human reflexivity *tout-court* in the mirror. The differences between Eco's and Lotman's positions are useful for focusing on specific issues with de-veloping reflexivity in semiotic terms.

Umberto Eco argues that the mirror is a *rigid designator* (paraphrasing the famous argument of the philosopher and logician Saul Kripke, 1980) that does not translate but records what strikes it. The mirror works as a neutral prosthesis, allowing one to grasp the visual stimulus where the eye could not (for example, in front of one's body, around a corner, in a cavity) with the same force and evidence. Umberto Eco argues that the magic of mirrors consists in the fact that their extensiveness and intensity not only allow us to better look at the world but also to look at ourselves as others see us. The mirror proposes the question of the «threshold phenomenon» (Eco, 1975).

This is an issue of no small importance: the mirror represents a threshold phenomenon for semiosis (Lotman, 1985; Kull, 2009; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Bacchini, 1995, 2017; Sonesson, 2015) without, however, being truly semiotic, as it lacks interpretative capacity. The mirror does not produce signs since a sign is characterised by its ability to refer to something else that may also be absent. Indeed, Eco states that the sign is linked by a semiotic relationship that correlates abstract types and not concrete occurrences; therefore, the sign presupposes an interpretative activity. In the mirror, we find a necessary relationship between the image and the referent, which can never be absent; thus, the image represents the specific contingent occurrence linked to the present object and, as such, it does not require an interpretation process by means of the mirror, but only reproduction according to the well-determined laws of optics and physics.



In reply to Eco's essay, in 1988, Lotman introduced the *XXII* issue of the journal *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* dedicated specifically to the mirrors. In his reply, Lotman recalls two key notions of his theorisation of the *semiosphere* and the *processes of signification*: border and enantiomorphism (Lotman, 1997). According to Lotman, the mirror represents a phenomenon of the semiotics of culture: it introduces the need for context in terms of problems of symmetry, of the logic of possible worlds, of mythology. Lotman believes that the mirror works exactly

as a border of the semiotic organization and as a border between our world and the world of others (with the whole range of achievements that can be had – from 'me/you' to 'before/after death'). From this point of view, the exchange between right and left of a regularity, the structural reorganization, for example the change in the direction of the passage of time (Uspenskij, 1988) represents a variety of the effect of specularity [...]. In the history of culture, the mirror reveals itself as a semiotic machine for describing an 'other's' structure; this is why it lends itself so well to logical games and mythological constructions (Lotman, 1997, pp. 128–129, our translation from Italian).

Our interest in this debate concerns the fact that the mirror itself does not constitute an automatic generator of meaning. Rather, it is the psychic activity of a human being (always culturally involved) that makes use of it. Starting from some of its precise characteristics, people can elaborate and complicate their experiences and think about themselves, their actions and their relationships with otherness and the surrounding world.

In the same volume introduced by Lotman, Levin offers a series of interesting arguments developing the idea of «The mirror as a potential semiotic object» (Levin, 1997). The reflection constitutes a reproduction of the original belonging to the iconic category. Therefore, the specular image is considered a sign in all respects according to Pierce's triadic model (1935) of icons, indexes and symbols. The mirror has semiotic potential deriving from being able to see what is outside the perceptive field of the observer.

The iconic representation in the mirror is identical to the original while at the same time differing from it, thus creating a real identity

paradox:  $(A = A)$  and  $(A \neq A)$ . The mirror allows “seeing oneself” and dialoguing with some possible “oneself”. It allows a mythological-narrative elaboration of the theme of the double, of self-awareness, of “looking into oneself/looking at oneself”, as well as the connected themes of the unity of ego, the illusion of the ego, narcissism, rejection and so forth. Furthermore, the reflected image in the mirror closely correlates with the *echo* (sound reflection) and the *shadow* (a sort of anti-reflection). This connection is attributable to the possibility of reproducing the original (the sound of the words in the echo, the image or outline of the figure in the shadow). Such connections have been richly developed in mythology and literature.

A further semiotic potential of the mirror consists in the figurative transformations allowed by its curvature. The concave mirror, enlarging the image, recalls the rhetorical figure of *hyperbola*, while the convex mirror, reducing the image, recalls the rhetorical figure of the *litote*.

Let us consider for a moment the association and similarity between mirror and linguistics. We find a very interesting connection between the mirror and the personal pronoun “I”:

If we compared mirror images to words, they would be like personal pronouns: like the pronoun /I/, meaning ‘Umberto Eco’. If I pronounce it, and someone else if someone else does so. I may, however, happen to find a message in a bottle reading ‘I was shipwrecked in the Juan Fernandez islands’; it would be clear to me that someone (someone who is not myself) was shipwrecked. But, if I find a mirror in a bottle, after taking it out with considerable effort, I would always see myself in it, whoever may have sent it as a message. If the mirror ‘names’ (and this is clearly a metaphor), it only names a concrete object, it names one at a time, and it always names only the object standing in front of it. In other words, whatever a mirror image may be, it is determined in its origins and in its physical existence by an object we shall call the image referent. (Eco, 1984, p. 211).

The linguistic sign “I” is considered an index sign due to its ability to refer from time to time to its enunciator. There is a relationship between what one sees in the mirror, one’s mirror image when one stands in front of it, and what one means by “I” when that word is spoken.

Augusto Ponzio reminds us: «This *I* belongs to me and coincides with me as long as I pronounce it, in the same way as what is seen in the mirror, the mirror image, belongs to me and coincides with me as

long as I am in front of the mirror» (Ponzio, 2005, pp. 108-109, translation from Italian).

A precise definition of the ego question from the linguistic point of view is present in the linguistics writings of semiologist Roman Jakobson:

Any linguistic code contains a particular class of grammatical units which Jespersen labeled shifters: the general meaning of a shifter cannot be defined without a reference to the message. Their semiotic nature was discussed by Burks in his study on Pierce's classification of signs into symbols, indices, and icons. According to Peirce, a symbol (e.g. the English word red) is associated with the represented object by a conventional rule, while an index (e.g. the act of pointing) is in existential relation with the object it represents. Shifters combine both functions and belong therefore to the class of INDEXICAL SYMBOLS. As a striking example Burks cites the personal pronoun. I means the person uttering I. Thus on the one hand, the sign I cannot represent its object without being associated with the latter 'by a conventional rule', and in different codes the same meaning is assigned to different sequences such as I, ego, ich, ja, etc.: consequently I is a symbol. On the other hand, the sign cannot represent its object without 'being in existential relation' with this object: the word designating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance, and hence functions as an index (cf. Benveniste). The peculiarity of the personal pronoun and other shifters was often believed to consist in the lack of a single, constant, general meaning. [...] For this alleged multiplicity of contextual meanings, shifters in contradistinction to symbols were treated as mere indices (Bühler). Each shifter, however, possesses its own general meaning. [...] In fact, shifters are distinguished from all other constituents of the linguistic code solely by their compulsory reference to the given message (Jakobson 1971, p. 132).

We now come to some conclusions that allow us to proceed further on our path. Any image reflected in the mirror has no semiotic character; rather, one's own image in the mirror (namely, in relation to the reflecting/reflected observer) has several simultaneous semiotic features:

- *In primis*, it has an "iconic value" (in terms of imitation/reproduction).
- *In secundis*, it has an "indexical value" (it refers to the observer who recognises it and connects it with his own present experience).

- *In tertiis*, it has a “symbolic value” (in fact, a first form of triadicity is created, with three elements involved: a person, her own image and the word “I” as a cultural sign device that seals the triad).

### **From One’s Own Image in the Mirror to the Constitution of the Self: The Psychoanalytic Contribution to the Question**

We have just seen how the question of human reflexivity is enriched by a further element: to be reflexive, a process must show the knowledge of referring to the “I” sign. This operation requires the gradual development of both an identity and a differentiation process. From a psychological point of view, many authors have grasped the duplicity and dialectic of the self and the other in psychic development. Freud’s text “The Uncanny” (1919) provides a very meaningful framework for discussing this development in the light of the tension between identity and otherness. One’s own image in the mirror works as the catalyst for this tension:

I can report a similar adventure. I was sitting alone in my wagon-lit compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a travelling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance (Freud, 1919, p. 248).

Regarding the German term *unheimlich*, translated into Italian as *perturbante* and into English as *uncanny*, Freud argues that it does not refer only to something frightening or terrifying but rather simultaneously recalls both the familiar (*heimlich*) and the unfamiliar (*unheimlich*), the known and the not-remembered, the acknowledged and the repressed. The uncanny represents the “double” that, in an unexpected way, brings back to consciousness the duplex meaning of familiar and extraneous, of identity and otherness, of similarity and

absolute difference. The uncanny is, therefore, something known and unknown, a mixture of conscious and unconscious psychic processes. A recent work has theoretically explored the transition from “thing representations”, typical of a pre-reflexive nature, to “word representations”, typical of a reflexive nature. For example, Suarez and Fossa (2020) have explored passage from the unconscious experience (pre-verbal, thing representations) to the conscious experience (verbal, executive functions, reflexivity), arguing that the pre-reflective unknown is also a form of knowledge, which is only accessible to reflection at a later time and with a psychic effort.

Lacan developed his inaugural contribution to this topic in 1939, starting precisely from the function of the mirror in the formation of the ego (Lacan, 2006). The Parisian psychoanalyst begins with the studies of the psychologist Wallon (1933), according to whom self-awareness is achieved progressively, starting with a confused multitude of components from sensorimotor actions of both endogenous and exogenous origin, that is, from one’s own body, from the surrounding material and relational environment, and from the care provided by the adult. Starting from this confused totality, the differentiated nuclei of the self and the other are built. Wallon argues that there is a very close connection between the development of one’s identity, the understanding of one’s image in the mirror and the capacity for symbolisation.

Starting from these arguments, Lacan’s hypothesis is that between six and eighteen months of age, there is a precise phase of development, which he defines as the “*mirror stage*”, during which a child comes to grasp himself as a unified identity thanks to his reflected image. Lacan argues that the mirror stage works in terms of identification, the transformation produced in the subject when he takes on an image.

Lacan distinguishes three stages in this process:

1. The child, even if strongly intrigued by what he sees in the mirror, does not yet recognise his own image but mistakes it for that of another. For example, the child may try to surprise this alleged other by looking behind the mirror.
2. The child recognises the fictitious, illusory character of the image and stops treating the image as a real object.
3. The child comes to recognise the image in the mirror as his own.

He identifies himself with it and “becomes exactly” the image of him. This stage marks a decisive step for psychic development, and it represents the foundation for all other subsequent identifications.

With the hypothesis of a mirror stage, Lacan intends to emphasise the identifying and unifying capacity of the reflected image, capable of giving unity and identity to a child during a phase of life in which he perceives himself and the world as still undifferentiated and fragmented. The central point of this discourse is that this awareness is, however, anticipatory, premature and external, as it arrives in advance of psychomotor maturity and mastery of the body. The mirror image anticipates an imaginary self (*moi*) of what will be a symbolic self (*Je*). The external image anticipates a bodily unity at a time when the child is not yet mature. In other words, the mirror image proposes an identifying *gestalt* for a fragmented, chaotic and disorganised body experience.

We can say that the child finds himself identifying with what he is not. The ego constitutes an imaginary, illusory dimension. In this decisive step, the mediating figure of a parent (or another figure) retains a decisive role in allowing the recognition of the child who, seeing the image of the other person doubled in the mirror, can recognise his own image in the mirror as such.

The English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott elaborates on the function of the mirror in psychic development in a different way while recognising his debt to Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. Winnicott argues that the maternal function, in addition to that of *holding*, *handling* and *presenting reality*, is to allow the child to be *mirrored*. Winnicott argues that the infant, when looking at the mother’s face, sees himself:

What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother’s face? I am suggesting that, ordinarily, what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 151).

When this does not happen, the child’s creative potential is lost since he is intent on scrutinising the world and environment as a source of danger rather than being able to carry out other activities. In the mother’s gaze, the child no longer seeks himself, seeing only the mother’s face. The mother ceases to be a mirror.

Otherwise, when the relationship with the mother is realised in a climate of trust and security, the conditions are created for the development of creative and transformative processes. A potential space is created between the child and the mother, an intermediate neutral area, based on the trust placed by the child in the mother, which will be the basis on which transitional phenomena will develop. Those particular psychic experiences occur on the border between inside and outside, between reality and play, which allow the child to develop potentialities, attitudes, creativity and imagination using the world of culture in personal, innovative and creative ways (Winnicott, 1971).

Winnicott elaborates on the relationship between the experience of looking at the mother's face and looking at oneself in the mirror in an unprecedented way.

This [the failure of mother mirroring] brings a threat of chaos, and the baby will organize withdrawal, or will not look except to perceive, as a defence. A baby so treated will grow up puzzled about mirrors and what the mirror has to offer. If the mother's face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 152).

As we are seeing, the mirror and its reflection of one's own image is relevant to the construction of identity in an intersubjective frame. Many authors have elaborated on this theme.

According to Heinz Kohut (1976), three main kinds of self-object are necessary for self-development processes: *mirroring*, *idealising* and *twinship* self-objects. A healthy experience of a *mirroring self-object*, such as being the sparkle in the parent's eye, facilitates self-esteem, ambitions and the ability to assert oneself later in life. Unlike mirroring self-objects, idealising self-objects arise from the desire to rely on or merge with an idealised other in times of difficulty or intense stress, similar to the desire to seek the resources of a secure attachment figure. When the idealised needs of the self-object are met, they foster a healthy sense of internal ideals and values and promote self-comfort and the regulation of emotions. Twinning self-objects respond to the needs for belonging, being recognised as a human being and feeling connected to similar others. They facilitate a sense of intimacy, belonging and connection with a larger group (Marmarosh & Mann, 2014).

The French psychoanalyst René Kaës offers a complete synthesis of the identifying processes by connecting intra-subjective and inter-subjective processes. He uses the analogy of the mirror to account for these processes:

I would like to develop the perspective according to which the intrapsychic process and the intersubjective framework – constituted by four structuring encounters – are simultaneously formed, and the effects of this double process become inscribed.

The first meeting precedes the coming into the world of *infans*. He is recognized as a member by anticipation of the community; and in turn the community recognizes itself in him (identification with the *idem*). The original identification with the human species is linked to this *first mirror* formed by the gaze of the parents alone and for their use, as it recognizes the newborn as being made ‘of the same stuff as the parents’ and other human beings. This is what P.-C. Racamier describes as the identification of the ego with human identity.

The second encounter is, as described by Winnicott, the one with the mother’s face: the child recognizes himself as himself in that he is thus designated as ‘himself’ by the look, by the games of the *echolalias*, by the echo *praxias*, by the *echochemistries*, and by the given word of the mother. *This second mirror is in continuity with the first*, it organizes its subjectivation in the child and in the parents. [...]

The meeting of oneself with *one’s own mirror image forms the third mirror*. This encounter was theorized by H. Wallon as a reaction to the mirror, then by J. Lacan as a stage of the mirror, the moment of the constitution of oneself (identification on the self-way) and of the other, of social feelings and of taking-disengagement imaginary, until the moment in which the mirror functions as a third among itself, the image of oneself and the other, and the conflicts and identifying resolutions of the fraternal complex are set up.

*The fourth encounter, triggered by the third function of the mirror*, is the one with the third embodied in the paternal function. This meeting inaugurates the conflicts and identifications associated with the Oedipus complex. In these four encounters, what is at stake are the relationships between the identifier (the signs that allow us to be identified), the identified (what is perceived and recognized) and the identification (what I am for myself, for another and for more-than-another). (Kaës, 2013, pp. 218–219, our translation from Italian, italics added).



In 1902, the American psychologist Cooley used the expression “looking glass self” in reference to the mirror function of social relations in the construction of the self. The term “looking glass” is an archaic English term for a mirror, and Cooley used the common image of a person looking at her reflection in a mirror as a metaphor for understanding the development of the social self (Shaffer, 2005). Cooley’s *looking glass self* represents the product of an active process of construction through the development of the imagination (Cooley, 1902). The looking glass self has three components. First, Cooley argued that individuals learn about themselves in any situation by exercising their imaginations to reflect on their social performance. By doing so, they imagine how others see them. This construction is basically like an image reflected in a mirror. Second, anticipating the theory of mind analysis, Cooley argued that individuals imagine what others think of them. Individuals imagine others’ evaluations of their actions. Third, the individual experiences an affective reaction to the imagined evaluation of the other. These affects are related to the imagined evaluations of others. If the evaluation is positive, the affect is positive (like pride), but if the evaluation is negative, the affect is negative (like shame or embarrassment) (cf. Shaffer, 2005, pp. 53–54).

Cooley’s theory of the looking glass self implies an expectation of the reactions of others, an impact of the judgments and evaluations of others, and a feeling of social desirability. Your image in the mirror acquires the character of a mask to be worn and displayed on the social stage. An individual is conceptualised as a social actor. These arguments remind us very closely of Jung’s conceptualisation of the “*persona*” (Jung, 1934/1954). According to Jung, the person is the mask that the individual wears in social relations with the other, assuming a social role, fulfilling and responding to the expectations of others.

However, there is still a further level of mirror processes for the psychic construction of the subject. In Bakhtin’s hypothesis, reflexivity is an activity of self-awareness and the product of a deeper dialogic activity. The character of social complacency is not the fundamental aspect; rather, it is the construction and progressive development of one’s self-awareness as a reciprocal and dialogical act. That implies a border position in its constitution as a common action (De Luca Picione, 2017a, 2020a, 2021; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017).

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a thou). Separation, dissociation, and enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one's self. Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence. This is the highest degree of sociality (not external, not material, but internal). [...] The very being of man (both external and internal) is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate. Absolute death (nonbeing) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered. To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287)

According to Bakhtin, reflection is a deep intersubjective process that implies a radical otherness as a primary ground for self-construction.

### **Semiotic Mediation as a Prerequisite for Reflexivity**

Previous arguments from semiotics, cultural psychology and psychoanalysis on reflexive processes provide us with a solid basis for developing below a series of implications and defining the basic principles of a dynamic model of reflexivity.

The process of reflexivity implies several circumstances:

- the suspension of a direct connection with the world,
- the impossibility of a predetermined response to stimuli and environmental constraints, and
- the need to constitute oneself as an individual with one's own specificities by integrating the demands of otherness.

The ability to develop "*higher level psychic functions*" (Vygotsky, 1987) lies in the possibility of being able to use signs, symbols and language as mediation tools between the individual and the environment:

The function of signs in HPFs [higher Psychological Functions] is to mediate the influence of external stimuli on the reactions of the organism. With this mediation, an organism emancipates from the direct influence of the perceptual field on its behavior. In other words, sign operations allow to process perceived information differently from purely perceptual forms of organizing experiences. (Toomela, 2016, p. 101).

The philosopher Cassirer (1923–1929) highlighted that human life is characterised by a completely new way of adapting to the environment. This is made possible by inserting a third symbolic system between the other two systems (the receptive and reactive systems present in every animal species). By virtue of this symbolic thirdness, there is a qualitative jump: the human being does not live in an extended reality; rather, he lives in a new dimension of reality that he himself contributes to building, renewing and transforming.

The contribution of a semiotic approach in the psychoanalytic field makes it possible to observe, study and deepen our understanding of how processes of symbolisation and sensemaking always organise human experiences. People spend their lives symbolising their experiences through signs (Valsiner, 2007, 2014; Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore *et al.*, 2022, 2021; Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Freda, 2008; De Luca Picione, 2015b, 2020c; Neuman, 2003, 2008; Marsico, Ruggeri & Salvatore, 2015). The notion of semiotic mediation signs therefore plays a pivotal role (Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017): a sign can be considered a device that creates systems of relations (De Luca Picione, 2015a, 2021a, 2021b; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017). This implies that feeling, thinking and acting are semiotic forms. The sensemaking of experience is a process of articulating signs, by means of which people can simultaneously perform two apparently paradoxical operations:

- a) distancing themselves from the here and now of experience, and
- b) living in the present time but “forgetting” that signs are being used to think, act and relate (Valsiner, 2007, 2014; De Luca Picione, 2017a; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017).

According to Toomela (2016), the signs used by humans have four specific characteristics: availability for the senses, conventionality, superimposition of meaning and reference to something else. The last characteristic is typical of the human animal and has an eminently cultural character: it must be possible to use a sign in ways and contexts

that are different from the ways and contexts in which the referents of the signs appear.

From a semiotic point of view, the mind and every psychic process appear dynamic, contextual, temporal, local and contingent. This can be summarised by some semiotic tenets that grasp the essential and general aspects of every psychic process beyond its phenomenological occurrence. Sergio Salvatore (2016) summarised the mind in these terms:

1. The mind is not an entity but a recursive dynamic within a semiotic flow.
2. This semiotic flow is an infinite movement of the connection of signs over time. A sign is something that stands for something else; therefore, the combinatorial dynamics of semiosis occur between elements that have no intrinsic substance but that acquire value through the combination of the present one and what follows.
3. A semiotic dynamic is not the action of the single individual and his intrapsychic states but is socially distributed and radically intersubjective.
4. Signs are “states” of the body. A sign is a modification of the body that represents a further modification of the body. No sign has content: it acquires meaning through the infinite game of reference to something else, thanks to which the body is constituted as a mind.

Therefore, through signs and their concatenation over time, people can signify their experience, act, interact, and learn by reformulating past experiences and re-constructing expected future scenarios.

Based on these arguments, we consider reflexivity a pure semiotic process of the transformation and construction of the meaning of one’s experience. The phenomenon of reflexivity (psychologically understood) requires that the reflected information (returning to the thinking subject) is shown in the form of a symbolic representation; that is, it makes use of semiotic mediation. Properly, the semiotic mediation creates conditions for reflexivity. Furthermore, to prevent this process from closing in a finite and self-referential circle in which the subject identifies himself with his own thinking activity, we must ask ourselves, what is the minimum condition for permitting openness and an ongoing process of identification?

According to Lotman, the basic form of each “thinking structure” is the *enantiomorphism*, or *mirror symmetry*:

The simplest and most widely disseminated form of combination of a structural identity and difference is enantiomorphism, mirror symmetry, through which both parts of the mirror are equal, but unequal through superposition, i.e. relating one to the other as right and left. Such a relationship creates the kind of correlative difference that distinguishes both identity – rendering dialogue useless – and non-correlative difference – rendering it impossible. If dialogic communication is the basis of meaning generation, then enantiomorphism divides the unity, and the rapprochement of the difference forms the basis of the structural correlation of individual parts in the construction of meaning generation. Mirror symmetry creates the necessary relations between structural diversity and structural similarity, which allow dialogic relationships to be built. On the one hand, the systems are not identical and give out diverse texts, and on the other, they are easily converted, ensuring mutual translatability. We may say that, in order for dialogue to take place, the participants must be distinct and yet simultaneously contain within their structure a semiotic image of counter-agent (Paducheva, 1982), and thus enantiomorphism represents the primary ‘mechanism’ of dialogue (Lotman, 2005, pp. 218–219).

Lotman uses the mirror metaphor to explain the relationship between symmetry and asymmetry. According to the Estonian semiotician, all the mechanisms that generate meaning start from an initial state of symmetry, that is, of equilibrium and stillness, which becomes progressively sophisticated through the production of an *enantiomorphic specular symmetry*. Enantiomorphism is defined as a case of specular symmetry that occurs when the parts are specularly equal but unequal when overlapped, as in the case of gloves or hands.

Both in the internal relationships between the parts of a semiosphere and in the extra-systemic relationships of the semiosphere with the outside, there are continuous tensions between homogenisation and differentiation. Lotman highlights the semiotic process as a dynamic that proceeds from *symmetry* to *enantiomorphic specular symmetry* and, finally, to *asymmetry*. The creation of novelty (that is, new meanings that feed cultural processes) is ensured by the processes of translation and the production of enantiomorphic models.

An intriguing convergence between this semiotic perspective and psychoanalysis can be envisaged in the recent attempt to formulate, in formal logical terms, the Bi-Logic theory of thinking originally proposed by Matte Blanco (1975). The symmetric mode «treats the

converse of any relation as identical with the relation. In other words, it treats asymmetrical relations as if they were symmetrical» (Matte Blanco, 1975, p. 38). Once the possibility of representing asymmetric relationships is abolished, the main characteristics of unconscious functioning emerge: specifically, no ordering criterion (and therefore no “time”) can be found in the symmetric mode. As any symmetric relationship is reformulated in terms of a symmetric one, only essentials, such as “motherhood”, can be represented within the symmetric mode. Finally, we are forced to recognise the equivalence of any proper part of a set to the whole, leading to the emergence of the symmetric infinite. In the abstract symmetric mode, similarity relationships (*structural similarity*, in Lotman’s terms) overtake differentiating ones (*structural difference*, again in Lotman’s terms); in actual thinking, however, structural similarity and structural difference appear to coexist. In a recent attempt to analyse the properties of the Bi-Logic theory in terms of formal logic, a complete definition of the symmetric set was provided in terms of the *infinite singleton* set (Battilotti, Borozan & Lauro Grotto, 2021). Nevertheless, once the symmetric infinite is introduced in the formal model, we are faced with the need to confine it somehow, to embed it within an asymmetric structure in order to sustain thinking and allow the ubiquitous interplay of its symmetric and asymmetric aspects, as already proposed by Matte Blanco. The semiotic perspective could provide an *enantiomorphic way* to reframe and face the problem of embedding symmetry within asymmetry in the development of a formal thinking model.

From a systemic paradigm that considers Bateson’s (1979) view, the specular dynamic involves two information sources that together provide knowledge of a different logical order than separately. The human perception of distance is an example from the neurobiology of binocular vision; it is the result of the overlapping of the left and right fields of vision. This resulting creation of novelty is coherent with Peirce’s proposal of abduction as a third type of logical inference, in addition to the traditional types of deduction and induction (Burks, 1946; Peirce, 1935). This creative semiosis leads to insights in the scientific arena and in everyday life (Aguayo, 2011; Burks, 1946; Peirce, 1935). It occurs in the presence of co-categorisations based on similitude (Hui *et al.*, 2010) and leads to broader relational systems by introducing new logical hierarchies and rules of more complex

abstraction levels (Bateson, 1979). Such phenomena of symmetry and asymmetry constitute a dialogicality in which the asymmetry of sources of information allows reflexive processes of patterns of communication and the creation of new meanings (Molina *et al.*, 2018).

Accordingly, Lotman explicitly recognises that asymmetry and heterogeneity cannot be boundless in time and tend towards infinity (that would generate waste, superfluity and excess). In contrast, a tendency towards stability, conservation and homeostasis is created through “meta-descriptions” that block the drift of differentiation by creating a new systemic unity generated by rules, canons, grammars and codes and capable of holding together diversity and differences in the semiotic dynamics of the semiosphere.

We observe another structural paradox of the semiosphere, namely, a reciprocal tension between the drive towards *homogenisation* and the drive towards *differentiation*, where the former tends toward the creation of unitary semiotic formations of higher abstract levels, and the latter tends toward the creation of increasingly fragmented independent units capable of presenting themselves as totalities of meaning. Each semiotic “thinking structure” implies a mechanism for regulating both symmetry and asymmetry.

The reason for these notable phenomena lies in the fact that reflected objects possess their own internal structure of surface symmetry and asymmetry. Through enantiomorphic transformation, surface symmetry is neutralised and cannot be displayed in any other way, and asymmetry becomes the structural signifier. Therefore, mirror-symmetry represents the primary structure for the dialogic relationship. The law of mirror symmetry is one of the basic structural principles of the internal organisation of meaning-making constructions. It includes, at the topical level, such parallel phenomena as the ‘high’ or comic character, the appearance of doubles, parallel topicality and other well-known phenomena in the duality of intra-textual structures. Also included in this are the magic function of the mirror and the role of the mirror motif in literature and art. (Lotman, 2005, pp. 224–225).

Lotman believes that enantiomorphic forms can be found everywhere: in literary texts, paintings, art and whenever we are in the presence of parallel interweaving, the appearance of the “double”, specularisations between serious characters and comic characters and so forth.

## **Reflexivity as a Search for Continuity through Variability, Rupture and Transformation**

The above allows us to address the issue of the paradox of the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of the subject in his relations. We believe that this question has several possible declinations:

1. Continuity as a full way of living the experiential flow and discontinuity as discretisation by semiotic production.
2. Continuity and discontinuity of the subject's identity over time.
3. The relationship between continuity and discontinuity as a dialectical process activated by a "rupture".

1. Let's imagine a soccer player while he is playing. Taken from the experience of the match, he is very focused on following the movements of the ball. He is carrying out a first discretisation of the experience: he is living by selecting and articulating the semiotic production generated by the ball's movements. However, the aim of the game is to play together and against other players who are divided into two teams, one of which must become the winner by scoring more goals. In this sense, a certain degree of reflexivity is necessary to respond to the continuous "perturbations" of the game. Reflexivity processes help broaden and extend the semiotic organisation over time to allow the player not to simply stay with the moment-by-moment movements of the ball but to organise a team game with the other players and prepare a strategy of joint actions leading to victory.

Reflexivity and action are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are processes governed by semiotic constructions of temporality and abstraction at different levels. Reflexivity is a process in which people do not respond to stimuli with immediate reactions but rather are able to organise actions over time.

Some intervention methods in clinical psychology propose the concept of a «suspension of action» (Carli & Paniccia, 2003). On closer inspection, this modality of non-action is itself an action since it is configured as a voluntary inhibition of the immediate response (i.e., the acting-out), an inhibition of the reactivity to the provocations of the other, a suspension of the immediate complacency to the requests of the other. It is about "acting a non-acting"! This non-action is made possible precisely by a semiotic construction, which, by widening the temporal



window of understanding of relational processes, allows one to not respond in terms of moment-to-moment reactions but to organise and construct intersubjective relationships over time.

2. Each person is constantly involved in a process of transformation. Each new experience, each new relationship with otherness and each contextual change produces a series of transformations in the person. However, human beings are able to perceive themselves as continuous subjects over time through the sense of their identity. Identity functions as a semiotic organisation that is abstract and general enough to contain a multiplicity of aspects and functions, bonds and experiences. Identity ensures the continuity of the subject over time and in diverse relationships and contexts.

Identity (as an abstract semiotic process) has two sides: on the one hand, it ensures the continuity of the subject despite continuous transformations; on the other hand, it is always at risk of hypostatisation, that is, of transforming itself into a reified entity (Tarsi & Salvatore, 2013). When one's own identity is no longer problematised or questioned, this generates a closure of the semiotic space for any further possible sensemaking trajectory. Reflexivity, as a recursive process of increasing abstraction, interfaces with broad and general semiotic structures such as identity. Reflexivity allows the shift from «*I am*» (understood in absolute and a-contextual terms) to «*I how organize my relationships over time and in different contexts*», «*I how use the tools I have at my disposal*», «*I how tell myself in different circumstances*» (Freda & De Luca Picione, 2013).

3. According to our semiotic-dynamic perspectives, “experiencing” is the proper way to be affected by a rupture in the development process. An experience is a field of perturbation of the development trajectory that was taking place.

When faced with an obstacle that produces a rupture of continuity, a phase of perturbation, confusion, disorder and liminality is triggered (Lotman, 1993, 1985; Stenner, 2018; De Luca Picione, 2017, 2021; De Luca Picione & Lozzi, 2021). Such an unstable condition requires a new semiotic re-elaboration capable of both tolerating and containing the experience of rupture, novelty and uncertainty (De Luca Picione & Lozzi, 2021).

In this sense, “making experience” means to live a loss (rupture, discontinuity, uncertainty) and to attempt to reconstitute a broader general trajectory of development (Abbey & Valsiner, 2004; Zittoun, 2006). The breaking of continuity requires the construction of broader and more abstract semiotic structures to integrate new experiences. The semiotic reorganisation of an experience does not have the value of describing an event; rather, it represents a way to reconfigure new forms of continuity after experiences of rupture. It is a semiotic work capable not only of enduring but above all of tolerating, containing and reworking ambivalences, contradictions and discontinuities through new syntheses, projecting the subject into new possible relational scenarios. It is never completely saturating.

### **“Speculations” and Conclusive Implications**

In conclusion, we focus on a series of essential semiotic and psychoanalytic implications for reflexive processes.

First point: *for reflective activity, an observer (namely, a subject) is always needed.* By this, we mean that it is necessary to have a subjectivity that can exercise a precise point of view. A question arises regarding this issue: *What does a mirror reflect without an observer?* While I am writing, I wonder and try to imagine what the mirror in the other room is reflecting at this moment, without any observer’s gaze. I must conclude that the mirror paradoxically reflects “everything and nothing”, in the sense that it is potentially reflecting all the objects present in the room in a spatial relationship with it.

However, perhaps the mirror is reflecting nothing until my real perceptive activity enters into a relationship (in “dialogue” with the mirror), namely by exercising a certain direction of the gaze and impressing a specific point of view. The reflective activity is then something partial, specific and defined by the direction of the observer’s epistemic activity. Reflective activity constructs a possible chain of successive signs starting from a precise perspective, that is, from a minimum condition of breaking the multipotentiality. Therefore, the first fundamental implication of our discussion is that we must suppose a field of (virtual) multipotentiality, but one that immediately breaks

into a specular symmetry as soon as an observer enters into relation with it.

Second point: *There is always a need for a certain distance from the mirror* (De Luca Picione, 2015a; Freda, De Luca Picione & Esposito, 2016; Esposito, Freda & De Luca Picione, 2016). For there to be a reflection, a certain distance from the reflecting surface is necessary. An object placed on the surface of a mirror does not reflect anything since it lacks the necessary and indispensable distance between the object and the mirror that allows reflection. Similarly, for a subject to recognise himself in the reflected image, he must be at a certain distance from the mirror surface.

In 1945, Merleau-Ponty provided support for this claim. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes,

What protects the healthy man against delirium or hallucination is not his reason [sa critique], but rather the structure of his space: objects remain in front of him, they keep their distance and, as Malebranche said about Adam, they only touch him with respect. What brings about the hallucination and the myth is the contraction of lived space, the rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the solidarity between man and the world, which is not abolished but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 304).

When the person is totally identified with her action and the semiotic process finds direct and immediate expression in that action, it seems unlikely that there is any possibility of carrying out a reflexive process (De Luca Picione, 2015a). The semiotic mediation process fails, and we have the immediate translation of a bodily state into an acting-out.

This prompts us to consider that when the identification with one's own image is total, leaving no space for reflexivity, we have the illusion of not having any waste, loss, split or repressed unconscious element. Identity constitutes a full totality and does not produce any dialogue. The words of Jacques Lacan in his "Presentation on Psychical Causality" draw attention to precisely this issue:

It should be noted that if a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so (p. 139). [...] For the risk of madness is gauged by the very appeal of the identifications on which man strikes both his truth and his being. Thus rather resulting from a contingent fact – the frailties of his organism – madness is the permanent virtuality of a gap opened up in his essence. (Lacan, 2006, pp. 143–144).

The proximity or adherence of the object to the mirror surface prevents its reflection. Human reflective activity can grasp itself if it creates a game of approaching and moving away from its own semiotic devices. This implies a constant work of identifying and dis-identifying oneself from the same signs that one uses to act, think and relate (first of all, from the pronoun “I”, and then from all the predicative formulas of the copula “I am ...”).

We note a radical otherness in the same “I”. There is a radical form of otherness. It takes both the contextual and contingent form given by the exchange with the other and the precipitate of a series of past identifications. In full consistency with the second Freudian topic, the ego works as a mediation device, a semiotic device that swings from one side to the other of interacting positions (together with the “you” within the dialogic dynamic).

Dialogue – in both the intersubjective and intrasubjective form (the inner dialogue, Barros *et al.*, 2020) – requires a great mobility of the ego, which continuously repositions itself according to its frames of reference. The “I” sign is a “reflection” and, as such, the effect of a local point of view. The possibility of continual repositioning is necessary. The semiotic mediation process – in the ongoing reflexivity and its paradoxical dynamics – display through movements of psychological distancing and contextualisation (Molina & Del Rio, 2009; Simão *et al.*, 2011).

Third point: *reflexivity is an open, recursive, intransitive and unsaturated psychic process*. The previous considerations imply the assumption of an open cultural and symbolic exchange between the reality of the unconscious and social and material reality (Carli, 2011). The ego, as a mirrored reflection, is in a recursive process with the unconscious and otherness. If reflection is a process of static identification, it hypostatizes the identity and confuses the ego as an entity. This is the ontologising drift of reflection.

A possible distinction between reflection and reflexivity is useful, therefore, because the latter can be understood as a broader recursive process that occurs through transformations and through a dialogue between identity and otherness. *In reflection, there is a dyadic relationship* (a one-to-one static correspondence between sign and subject, that is, between I and subject, through copulative predication). *In reflexivity, triadic relationships are realised* (between subjectivity, sign production and the dynamic of transformation over time, that is, between subjectivity, otherness and the transitory contextuality of the relationship that acts as a local interpretant *à la* Pierce) (Pierce, 1935).

Reflexivity is a process that mobilises a virtual and imaginary construction. It implies the re-articulation of the modal categories of necessity, possibility, contingency and impossibility (De Luca Picione, Martino & Freda, 2018; De Luca Picione, Martino & Troisi, 2019). Reflexivity creates a “possible local” (a changeable contingency according to the trajectory of the point of view) starting from a state of necessity (i.e., the mirror must always reflect something). The possibility of seeing things differently as a result of different reflective references opens up to the construction of possible worlds, of pasts that can be revisited differently, and of futures that can be imagined in many ways. Reflexivity activates an area of transitionality (Winnicott, 1971).

Reflexivity implies many hypothetical constructions: fictionality (the “*as if*”), counterfactual sensemaking processes of experience, the construction of stories and narratives, and multiple temporal frames in which to organise thoughts, texts and actions. The product of the reflective process is an “*as if*”, always in continuous transformation. When there is a risk that it transforms into an “*as it is*”, temporality then ceases to be a composite and dynamic structure and is crystallised into forms already given, already predictable (deceptively) and without any possible novelty.

A reflexive semiotic surface is an unsaturated regulatory mechanism, closed from the structural-synchronic point of view (the subject needs to self-refer in order to organise thoughts, actions and relationships) but open from the dialogic-diachronic point of view (continuously reserving novelties, exceptions, and the need to review one’s own position and that of the other).

In conclusion, we consider three Greek myths where the presence

of the mirror assumes a central relevance: the myth of Narcissus, the myth of Medusa and the myth of Dionysus. Tagliapietra's readings (1991) of these myths are very instructive with respect to our semiotic and psychoanalytic hypotheses on reflexivity.

In the myth of Narcissus, Narcissus dies in an effort to connect with his mirror image on the surface of a lake. Denying otherness and falling in love with his own image, in a movement of identification *tout-court* with his reflection, he dies by drowning in the waters that reflected him. Self-recognition as an unavoidable passage for reflexivity generates the death of the subject when there is no longer any opening but only an exclusive closing on itself. There is no longer anyone else, only the self; there are no longer differences, only identity with oneself.

In the myth of Medusa, the monster whose gaze petrifies her victims, Medusa is defeated by the hero Perseus through the reflective power of his shiny shield. Perseus defeats Medusa by looking at her through a mirror and avoiding looking directly at her. The absolute otherness – an unspeakable and non-sense experience (which leads to death) – is stemmed through a structure of reflected signs to avoid burning and direct contact with the lack of sense of experience. This leads us to think that the experience of the world and of oneself can never be direct; it is always mediated by the signs we use to approach it. Reflexivity is a mediated experience, and one's identity always reflects this relational character.

In the myth of Dionysus, when the god was a child, before being savaged by the titans, he looked in a mirror and instead of seeing his face, he saw the entire universe. Here we find no longer absolute sameness or absolute otherness but the whole cosmos in its totality as the coincidence and coexistence of opposites; one's own image is diluted in the multitude of things and the faces of others. Then, the titans were burned as punishment by the other gods. From their ashes, which also contain part of the devoured Dionysus, human beings are born. This passage of the myth is decisive. The divine experience of totality refracted in the mirror is digested (eaten and burned), and only from its partiality is the birth of man and of thinking possible.

In the psychoanalytic context, already in 1921, Lou Andreas-Salomé proposed an idea of the primary Narcissism as an original state, grounded in pre-natal and infantile experience, in which the identity

has not yet emerged from an undifferentiated state and in which we perceive ourselves as the whole and the whole as ourselves. She depicts, with a poetic image, the human being as a plant that longs for the Sun (i.e., for the differentiated state) while at the same time being grounded in the soil of this universal undifferentiated state (Andreas-Salomé, 1921).

In line with our arguments, reflexive experience can never be a psychic activity that includes the entirety of the individual, the wholeness of the world and the completeness of experience; rather, it can take shape precisely by starting as partial, unsaturated and lacking.

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