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Narcissus in Troubled Waters explores the myth of Narcissus from its earliest sources, to offer a study of its repercussions on the art of the 20th century.

The myth is a cultural archetype, to be found all through Western literature and art history, a myth that is at the origin of a strategy of representation that confronts a person with his or her own image through a medium. This study brings to light the situations of illusion structuring this founding story in each of its variations, and examines their reformulation in visual terms: in the work of Caravaggio and Poussin, then through various examples taken from the artistic activity of the 20th century right up to our own time.

As such, the metamorphosis of Narcissus into a concept—narcissism—and above all its re-elaboration through the image—the mirror stage—are confronted with the myth. On the strength of the different historical, exegetic, and visual layers covering the story of Narcissus, this book offers case studies taken from the work of three artists, Francis Bacon, Bill Viola, and Jeff Wall. Each of the three bodies of work selected exemplifies the use of a different artistic medium: painting, video, and photography. They offer not only a reverberation of the myth and/or its visual instantiations but can, moreover, interact with each other, communicating at times through the grace of an explicit reference from one artist to another, in such a way that this work is constructed as a coherent thematic circuit.
NARCISSUS IN TROUBLED WATERS
Francis Bacon, Bill Viola, Jeff Wall

Preface by
VICTOR I. STOICHITA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS  
11  
PREFACE by Victor I. Stoichita  

15  
1. INTRODUCTION  

21  
2. THE SOURCES OF NARCISSUS  

21  
Ovid  
26  
The Stage of the Other  
28  
Caravaggio's Narcissus  
31  
The Stage of the Mirror  
35  
Nicolas Poussin, Echo and Narcissus  

45  
GreeK SOURCES  
45  
Konon  
47  
Pausanias  
49  
The Narcissus Flower in the Myth of Demeter and Persephone  
52  
Philostratus  
61  
Nicolas Poussin, The Birth of Bacchus  
64  
In the Mirror of Zagreus/Dionysus  
67  
Leon Battista Alberti  

71  
3. NARCISSUS ENCOUNTERING NARCISSISM:  
THE MIRROR IMAGE  

72  
Jacques Lacan: The Mirror Stage  
75  
The Specular Reflection  
76  
The Illusion of the Image  
78  
Death  
81  
Der Todestrieb  
85  
Scopic Drive and Death Drive
4. FRANCIS BACON
“DE-FACED” SELF-PORTRAITS

“Death at Work”

Late 60s

The Face in Shreds
The Face on a Strip

Early 70s

The Black Hole-Face

The End

The Face of Shadow and Light
The Face to Dust

5. BILL VIOLA
A DISTURBED MIRROR

The Reflecting Pool

Narcissus in Tears

The Passions

Purification

6. JEFF WALL
SELF-REPRESENTATION AND THE SELF-REFLECTIVITY OF THE MEDIUM

7. CONCLUSION

8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

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

On the strength of this preamble the book then launches into a critique of the Lacanian notion of the “mirror stage.” This is a core chapter detailing the importance of Jacques Lacan’s approach on the one hand, and on the other, the weak or even obscure as-
pects of his theory. His conclusion emphasizes the fact that the re-
elaboration of Freudian narcissism through the Lacanian mirror
stage remains at a distance from the myth. Narcissus, as Henri de
Riedmatten shows us, never really undergoes the ordeal of narcis-
sism. And yet madness and death resonate in the perception of his
specular image.

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

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

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

What makes this book a remarkable achievement is the author’s
ability to combine philosophical reflection and the study of written
sources with the deciphering of the language of images, considered in close relation to the medium. The book proves not only that great myths survive but also that the history of art, far from having used up all its resources, is capable of self-renewal by bringing important answers to the burning questions of present-day artistic creation.

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

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

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

The current medial reading of the Ovidian version is in line with the ideas expressed in the work of Rheinart Herzog and Christiane Kruse, (My thanks to Christiane Kruse for giving me access to this text). Reinhart Herzog also refers to Karlheinz Stierle, replicating the structure of his Dreistufenmodell in: K. Stierle, (1975) 1997, pp. 289-326. Cf. C. Kruse, 1998, pp. 102-103. This article also appeared in a slightly modified and enhanced form as a chapter in: C. Kruse, 2003, pp. 312-313.
while it is also based on the triangular configuration of image – medium (device \[dispositif\]) – gaze (body) proposed by Hans Belting in his plea for “an anthropology of images.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

\(^{11}\) S. Freud, (1914) 2003, p. 3.
\(^{14}\) V.I. Stoichita, 2008, p. 5.
sider the various *mises en scène* that make use of the myth’s specificities in order to render the theme of a “troubled” situation, thus echoing, for example, the different phases of Narcissus’ encounter at the spring. “Troubled” may be interpreted here in a number of ways: the troubled surface of the water, of the medium, causing the figure to be distorted, or even the spectator’s troubled feelings on discovering how difficult it is to discern what he is seeing in the image (different projections of the artist within the body of his work; presence of an individual and his double in the work; mirror relation between the work and the spectator who gazes at it [painted mirror]; etc.).

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

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

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of paint on canvas Bacon was able to imprint suffering on a face or on a body.\textsuperscript{16}

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