**Mirror, Mirror**

*An abstract painting will react to you if you react to it. You get from it what you bring to it. It will meet you half way but no further. It is alive if you are. It represents something and so do you. YOU, SIR, ARE A SPACE TOO.*

—Ad Reinhardt

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I have a picture of myself reflected in the big windows of New York Bar, superimposed against the famous Tokyo skyline, which—I hate to tell you—looks like every other glittering cosmopolis from fifty-two floors up, in snapshot stasis. S stands right out of frame, conspicuously absent. He'd flown twelve hours from Los Angeles just to discover that we were inextricably on the rocks: a fact I'd been trying to defer for the better part of a year.

The process of admitting these things is uniquely hard when you're young—when a college relationship founded on a high school friendship means that a person has, in total, inhabited almost half of your life.

It's a long, long, lonely way down.

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In the first hundred pages of Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, our narrator experiences a fateful brush with art. Bergotte, his favorite author, is effectively his first love—someone whose mind echoes his own.

Of this encounter, Proust writes:

> *[If] I happened to find in one of his books something which had already occurred to my own mind, my heart would swell as though some deity had, in his infinite bounty, restored it to me, had pronounced it to be beautiful and right. It happened now and then that a page of Bergotte would express precisely those ideas which I often used to write to my grandmother and my mother at night, when I was unable to sleep, so much so that this page of his had the appearance of a collection of epigraphs for me to set at the head of my letters.*

An epigraph is, in itself, a perverse kind of love letter: you recognize yourself in a text, so you divorce it from its surroundings. You remove it from time so that it speaks directly to you. It is an exercise in manipulation, in self-delusion. It is a letter you answer, but one whose author exists—in your precise recreation of his existence—only in your mind.

Of course Marcel is disappointed upon meeting the real Bergotte. The man is a person, not a mirror.

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When I was a kid, I played a game of my own invention every time I found myself in the ocean right before dusk. The game was to swim into the reflection of the sun on the waves, and the point was to reach the center of the light.

This was, I realize, an impossible object—one that augured a parade of impossible objects.

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When the poet James Merrill was around my age—in 1947, his last year at Amherst—he wrote his senior thesis on Proust. Upon reading it, his advisor announced to Merrill's class that he was *destined for some sort of greatness*.

Even in his twenties, Merrill's mind was pristine, crystalline, stratospherically removed. My obsessions are pale overlays against his own—French impressionism, metaphor, the transparencies of image and language—

I haven't read Merrill's paper, only his biographer's gloss of it on the Amherst website. It's a kind of reflective surface, one in which I see myself as I would like to be.

Eleven years after his graduation, in the poem "Mirror," Merrill writes in the voice of his eponymous object: *I cannot teach you children* / *How to live*.

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There's a scene in Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) where Bill Murray's character Bob Harris, a fading star whose agency has shipped him off to do whisky commercials in Japan, gets stuck on an elliptical he can't figure out how to stop. He hasn't yet grown close with Scarlett Johansson's Charlotte, so he's completely alone in the Park Hyatt's rooftop gym. It's just him, yelling for help, and the whir of the machine, and its mechanized voice.

It is notable, I think, that he cries out to an empty space.

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In my post-war modern art class, I develop a fascination with Gerhard Richter's Mirror paintings. These works range in type and scale: some are unadorned looking-glasses arranged in conversation with each other, some are high-gloss colored panels. In pictures of the exhibitions —which almost always exclude human figures—Richter's objects echo back the contours of the

spaces they inhabit. They generate a kind of shadow gallery, a subterranean counterpoint to the one in which we're invited to move.

Abstract art thrives in theoretical terms, the language of removal, the language of space. These works—monochrome but universally representative, constantly and fundamentally defined by their surroundings—become my way in, then my way back out. I start seeing the world in terms of reflective surfaces.

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For tourists, particularly disaffected young people, *Lost in Translation* is the quintessential *Tokyo movie*. I first watched it on the plane back to Los Angeles from my sophomore year of college, a few weeks before starting my summer internship in Japan.

I suppose I didn't think much of it until I'd lived it myself. As much as Coppola manages to capture on film the exact way Tokyo feels—and oh, how she does, in every backlit crosswalk and neon shoegazey blur—it's always drawn through the lens of a distinct and dreamy foreignness, an inexorable dislocation.

When I write about Tokyo, I mean a brief flicker of the city how I saw it: from a distance, under glass, through my own reflection. That's the trouble with describing a place to which you feel so intimately attached. It's never really the place, it's always you.

To travel is to attempt to lose yourself, over and over again. You displace yourself in hopes of being found.

This rarely happens.

So you seek out empty rooms where you can call for help and hear your own voice ricochet back, simply estranged by the phenomenon of distance.

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After Richter, I find mirrors everywhere—in Merrill, in Proust, in a Zoom class on nineteenth-century European art. Some are both figurative and literal. On the drunk walk home from a party, I go on and on to E about a gilded Renaissance looking-glass I'd seen in a seminar earlier that day.

*I get it, it's comforting*, she says. *It lets me know that someone, a long time ago, looked at herself and saw*—here she pauses—*well, I guess, me.*

*

Coppola made *Lost in Translation* as a direct reflection of her own experience; she spent much of her twenties in Tokyo developing her cult clothing line Milk Fed. In interviews, she describes feeling a profound and overwhelming sense of isolation, *looking a lot at the idea of being connected because at that moment, [she] wasn't.*

It's easy to see the director in Charlotte—young, recently married, striking out on her own—but she's Bob too: world-weary, detached, trying to live outside the shadow of her own name. Her protagonists are the same source of light at two different angles, refracted thirty-something years apart in time.

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My friend N is writing a screenplay. She tells me that all her characters sound exactly like her. To the extent to which these things are always true, this is true.

Everything you make is a house of mirrors, a world cast in your own image.

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In *Lost in Translation*, as in all love stories, two people look at each other and see themselves. Bob and Charlotte's relationship is an ambiguous, sexless affair: in a brief departure from their marriages, the conjoined rhythms of their domestic lives, they find their own reflections.

When you're in a relationship, it's the worst time to fall in love. But when you feel trapped, you're prone to go looking for yourself, if only to try and see something beyond the walls of the room you're in. And when you deliberately look for yourself—especially when you know you shouldn't—you start finding yourself everywhere.

This is how I make some sense of what I did. I fell in love in Tokyo, when S was halfway across the world. I fell in love in Boston, and in Chicago. I felt irreparably distanced from myself, so I fell in love with everyone who saw me as I could be. Sometimes S suspected, sometimes he didn't. Sometimes, cruelly, I told him how I felt.

I tell you this story because this is how I got here. These are the impressions forever suspended over my memory of these places.

This, too, is a reflection.

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In 1974, three years after Coppola was born and almost three decades before I was, Merrill's poem *Lost in Translation* first appeared in the *New Yorker*. It is an extended riddle, a series of projections, an exercise in Proustian memory. It is a narrative of childhood, one that plumbs loneliness for a strange sort of revelation. It is also a love letter.

It's Merrill's story, and our own. Like Marcel's Bergotte, the poem seems to stand for us—before us—reflecting us back at ourselves.

Merrill's mirror tells me it cannot teach me how to live.

But perhaps, from somewhere far outside the limits of my own life, Merrill *himself* can—for *nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation—*

> *And every bit of us is lost in it*
> *(Or found—I wander through the ruin of S*
> *Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)*
> *And in that loss a self-effacing tree,*
> *Color of context, imperceptibly*
> *Rustling with its angel, turns the waste*
> *To shade and fiber, milk and memory.*

*

Many surfaces are accidentally reflective, but a mirror—a *looking-glass*—is one expressly designed to show us ourselves. When you call something a mirror, you prescribe it a certain intentional quality.

Art always establishes itself along specific lines of looking. But not all art comes clean about it. This is the particular beauty of Richter's mirrors, which take you by the eyes and say *look, this is how to look at yourself—*

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On the *Lost in Translation* promotional poster, Bill Murray's Bob sits alone in a hotel robe and slippers. Above him hover the words *Everybody wants to be found*.

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Here is another epigraphic looking-glass, a passage from Plato's *Phaedrus*—

> *So he is in love, but with what, he does not know; and he neither knows what has happened to him, nor can he even say what it is, but like a man who has caught an eye-disease from someone he can give no account of it, and is unaware that he is seeing himself in his lover as if in a mirror.*

Here are some questions translated across time—

Is it so terrible to see yourself in another person? Is it so terrible to look at the world and only ever see yourself?

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The Shinjuku Park Tower plays host to the Park Hyatt, which in turn houses *Lost in Translation*'s iconic New York Bar. The tower—a tripartite building jutting from a circular driveway that separates it from the rest of the city ward—is composed entirely of blank faces, sheer drops, mirrored surfaces.

From the ground, it has a lonely, monolithic aspect. The fact of its estrangement makes *you* feel at once estranged and reflected, separate and seen.

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When you see yourself in something, you necessarily abstract it. You blur the parts of it that aren't exactly you. You turn people and places alike into spaces—illusions of empty rooms.

In Tokyo, I spend a lot of my nights out. A well-curated club is a perfect mirror: it presents you with a distant image of yourself, refracted into a thousand different moving parts against the crowd, the music, the flashing lights. Done right, it becomes a microcosmic universe of intense displacement—intense recognition.

I’m wandering the fringes of a Minato City dancefloor when I stumble across the smoking area, a mirror-walled room populated by ghostlike figures moving mutely, languidly—as if jellied, or submerged—through a diffuse red glow. It’s a reflected world, a vague sphere of undefined Miltonic forms. I feel as though I’ve been caught up in a vision, a montage, an orchestrated blur of moments and impressions.

Suddenly, I’m eight years old—and seventeen—and twenty-three—in a series of different seas, treading water in the wake of the setting sun.

I look into the light, and there I am.

*

Places exist to us in our memory of them, as a series of momentary fragments. Memory itself is a kind of place, like Coppola’s mirror; like Richter’s mirrors, a series of rooms viewed in reflection, through the tonal filters of experience and time; as in Plato and Proust, an epistolary lover defined in terms of likeness.

Like Merrill’s mirror, memory will not tell you how to live. It only presents you with the image of who you are.

Were they to read this account, the people who appear here might not recognize the images that I've projected. Perhaps they would, instead, find themselves in the version of me who has made these things.

So much is lost in translation: the passage from the reflected world to the world of perception. You—like a mirror, like a painting—are always seeing through a frame, the limiting edges of yourself.

You, sir, are a space too.