

Reflexivity: Definitions and discriminations¹

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When we think ... we ourselves, as we are at
that moment appear as a sign.
Charles Sanders Peirce

Self-regarding does not have a good press. It smacks of narcissism, solipsism, and subjectivism. Despite our concern with 'subjective meanings' and despite the centrality of reflexivity to the ethnographic enterprise, self-reference is something that, as anthropologists concerned with the objective, the social, and the shared, we are likely to denounce or at least not talk about. 'It is evident that no one wants any part of a philosophy which scandalizes the primitive fact of experience: that ours is a social world' (Natanson 1974b: 241). However, it is also evident that reflexivity is 'the inevitable accompaniment of any method which demands scrutiny of its own terms and procedures' (Natanson 1974b: 243). In this regard, an epistolary remark by Victor Turner concerning the 1976 symposium, *Rituals and Myths of Self: Uses of and Occasions for Reflexivity*, from which the present collection of essays emerged, is particularly interesting. He said, and I quote: 'Narcissus is a profoundly social myth'. Let me try to elucidate this paradoxical statement.

In *Mind, Self, and Society*, G. H. Mead argues that 'the self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience ... it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience' (1962: 140). The self so conceived is a semiotic construct. An individual 'becomes a self in so far as he can take the attitude of others and act toward himself as others act' (1962: 171). This capacity to differentiate and to establish a dialogue between a personal 'I' and a social 'me' is acquired through 'the conversation of gestures', primarily language. Language is the most important mirror in which the self is created and reflected. 'In order to know itself at all, to constitute itself as an object for itself, the self must be absent from itself, outside itself' (Ryan 1977: 697) — it must be a sign, as it is preeminently in

language. Mead, like Lacan, Piaget, and others, regards this primary instance of reflexivity, this initial experience of decentering, detachment, and differentiation as the primordial social experience essential to the development of both self and society.

Narcissus's tragedy then is that he is not narcissistic enough, or rather that he does not reflect long enough to effect a transformation from identity to identity with a difference. He is reflective, but he is not reflexive — that is, he is conscious of himself as an other, but he is not conscious of being self-conscious of himself as an other, and hence not able to detach himself from, understand, survive, or even laugh at this initial experience of alienation. Or, as Fichte has remarked, he is trapped in 'vain self-reflection' without achieving the 'ability to raise oneself above oneself'. Reflexivity, as Merleau-Ponty more recently has argued, 'presents a problem completely different from that of the return to the individual'; it involves rather the problem of knowing how we communicate, of 'knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own' (1964b: 52) — the problem of the return to the self by way of its other.

Reflexivity is a problematic concept, a paradoxical concept, and as Wittgenstein says, 'a concept with blurred edges'. In the remainder of this essay I would like to try to bring this concept into focus by presenting some basic definitions and formulations of reflexivity, and by introducing the different instances of and approaches to reflexive operations discussed by the contributors to this volume. The terms reflexive, reflexivity, and reflexiveness have been used in a variety of disciplines to describe the capacity of language and of thought — of any system of signification — to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself, and to refer to itself. Whether we are discussing things grammatical or cognitive, what is meant is a reflex action or process linking self and other, subject and object.

G. H. Mead defines reflexiveness as 'the turning-back of experience of the individual upon himself'. He goes on to note that 'it is by means of reflexiveness that the whole social process is brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it' (1962: 134). By virtue of this reflexive capacity, the individual is able to understand and adjust to the social process, to modify his future behavior, and to modify the social process itself. 'Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind' (1962:134). Mead's concept of reflexiveness is closely related to Cooley's theory of the 'looking-glass self', which he introduced as follows: 'The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind'

(Cooley 1902: 184). In a more recent and phenomenological formulation, Alfred Schutz has similarly noted that lived experience acquires meaning and is understood only reflexively or, in Goffman's terms, when it is 'framed': 'meaning is a certain way of directing one's gaze at an item of one's own experience. This item is thus "selected out" and rendered discrete by a reflexive Act' (Schutz 1967: 42). And linguists as well as philosophers have come to regard metacommunication as the *sine qua non* of all communication. Only by being able to reflect in words about words, to talk about talking, are we able to learn to talk and to do so successfully.

Reflexivity is not, however, a recent invention of linguistics, phenomenology, and psychology. Centuries ago, Heraclitus declared that every cosmology begins in self-knowledge. The distinction between an experiential ('Naked Self') and a reflexive ('Selfsame') self has been with us at least since Augustine, who regarded knowledge as requiring the informing of immediate experience by the reflecting mind. In a later and more secular context, Montaigne also spoke out against naive empiricism in favor of a reflexive attitude: 'If the world finds fault with me for speaking too much of myself, I find fault with the world for not even thinking of itself' (1973: 1354). And Rousseau, like Augustine, in *his Confessions*, endlessly described and agonized over the two beings within himself. In defining this reflexive capacity to regard oneself as an other and to be aware of oneself as his own instrument of observation, Rousseau defines an approach to knowledge not only of himself, but of mankind as well.

'To Rousseau we owe the discovery of this principle, the only one on which to base the sciences of man ... in ethnographic experience, the observer apprehends himself as his own instrument of observation. Clearly, he must learn to know himself, to obtain from a *self* who reveals himself as *another* to the *I* who uses him, an evaluation which will become an integral part of the observation of other selves' (Lévi-Strauss 1976: 36).

Perhaps, as Boon points out, the key to understanding Rousseau's formulation of personal reflexivity, as well as Durkheim's social concept, is the French reflexive verb construction. Unlike the English passive verb, the reflexive suggests interrelationship without determining the locus of the relationship or implying the existence of some agent behind the state described (Boon 1972: 203). This notion of reciprocal being is the cornerstone of Durkheim's sociology in which collective representations such as a clan's mythic ancestor are described as forms in which the group *se représentent à lui-même* (quoted in Boon 1972: 203). The collective symbolizing process as expressed in myths and rituals is such that it includes consciousness of itself within its operations. Lévi-Strauss similarly regards myths as forms of sociocultural metacommentary and not only sees men thinking themselves in myths, but the reverse as well. Most

recently, Clifford Geertz has described cultural performances such as the Balinese cockfight as a story that a group 'tells itself about itself' (1973: 448). Further, he regards the analysis of such reflexive representations as our only means of understanding how the people studied define themselves as persons, of what goes into the idea they have of what a self is.

The preceding suggests that all collective representations or systems of signification are reflexive, or what Russell and Whitehead call 'illegitimate totalities' — those which include, in their body, statements about themselves. I think they are and would be inclined to agree with Kenneth Burke's assertion in *Language as Symbolic Action* that it is this 'second-level aspect of symbolicity that is characteristically human', that we form, inform, and transform ourselves through 'the reflexive capacity to develop highly complex symbol systems *about* symbol systems, the pattern of which is indicated in Aristotle's definition of God as 'thought of thought', or Hegel's dialectics of self-consciousness' (Burke 1968: 24). In her last lectures on 'Thinking', Hannah Arendt similarly asserts: 'Those essential activities by which we distinguish ourselves from other animal species ... all have in common a *withdrawal* from the world as it appears and a bending back toward the self' (quoted in Jonas 1977: 39). Whether discussing man in the singular or man in the plural, philosophers from Plato and Hegel to Mead and Arendt define thinking as reflexive, as a dialogue that one carries on with oneself. The linguists and semioticians who analyze our various dialogues and modes of communication also argue that all systems of signification, whether visual or verbal, are inherently and necessarily reflexive. This position is summed up by Jameson as follows: 'Every enunciation involves a kind of lateral statement about language, about itself, and includes a kind of self-designation within its very structure' (1972: 202).

In discussing visual as well as verbal representations in *A Poetics of Composition*, Uspensky has remarked that

a symbol would cease to be a symbol and become, in our consciousness, a simple reality in its own right, without any relation to the thing symbolized, if the description of reality has as its object only reality: description must necessarily contain the symbolic nature of those very symbols; it must deliberately and consistently hold onto both the symbol and the thing symbolized. *The description must be double*. This duality is obtained through a critique of the symbols themselves. (1973: 139)

In visual representations, this doubling or self-critique is frequently created by the inclusion of a mirror reflecting the painting and/or the painter. The mirror translates and reproduces the reflexivity of the sensible. It is, Merleau-Ponty tells us,

the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself. Artists have often mused upon mirrors because beneath this mechanical trick, they recognized just as they did in the case of the trick of perspective the metamorphosis of seeing and seen which defines both our flesh and the painter's vocation. (1964a: 168)

This statement points to an intimate connection between reflexivity and indeterminacy. It is no accident that mirrors are used throughout the world to symbolize moments of transition between states, the *limen* between worlds. They also designate the possibility of using one world to comment upon the other, often in an inverted and licentious manner, as evidenced in the fool or jester's use of the mirror. Liminality would seem to imply reflexivity and vice versa. And reflexivity involves paradox and vice versa.

All self-referential operations involve the epistemological paradox in which the mind or the culture, by its own operation, attempts to say something about its operation. If not since Epimenides, at least since Russell and Whitehead, we have realized that statements by a member of a class about its own class tend to paradox.² By confounding subject and object, seer and seen, self and other, art and life — in short, by playing back and forth across terminal and categorical boundaries and playing with the very nature of human understanding — reflexive processes redirect thoughtful attention to the faulty or limited structures of thought, language, and society (Colie 1966: 7). Just as thinking is subversive, reflexivity in any form is a source of novelty and freedom *vis-à-vis* structure that remarks on the indignity of any closed system and reminds us that we have no absolute distinctions between what is 'real' and what is 'fictional', between 'I' and 'me', and that these domains are separated only by a transposition in our modes of attending to what there is. Just as reading the *Confessions* of Rousseau alters my awareness of myself, all forms of cultural performance do more than reflect sociocultural patterns and beliefs; they reflexively comment upon those patterns and alter a society's awareness of itself.³ Without reflexivity and the dialogue between 'I' and 'me', G. H. Mead argues, 'there would be nothing novel in experience' (1962: 178).

Conversely, paradox or any liminal or ambiguous situation is the occasion for reflexivity and may well involve us in infinite semiosis, if not the infinite regress of self-regard. In her treatise on paradox, Rosalie Colie has pointed out, 'paradox deals with itself as subject *and* as object, and in this respect too may be seen as both tautological and paradoxical [insofar as it] generates self-referential activity' (1966: 7). As William James suggested in his law of dissociation and Daniel Berlyne has demonstrated in his experiments, monsters and other such categorical confusions

similarly provoke abstract and creative thought. Through the reorganization of experience, 'the free recombination of the factors of culture into any and every possible pattern' (Turner 1974: 255) that occurs in all liminal states, including mere gaps in discourse, we come to know ourselves and our world, to know how we know, and to reflect on our own interpretive processes. As Victor Turner points out, major liminal occasions are like magic mirrors in which society takes cognizance of itself. A verbal paradox or an ellipsis has the same effect, generating self-referential activity on a lesser scale.

If we accept, as I think we must, that self-reference is an essential element in the formation of *any* meaningful system of signs, we are confronted with infinite variety, for reflexivity appears in many different costumes on many different stages. It may be *private*, as in the journal-keeping that Metzger and Myerhoff discuss in this volume, or *public*, when that same journal is read aloud and used for therapeutic or consciousness-raising purposes. It may be *singular* and *individual* — contemplating oneself in a mirror in the privacy of one's bathroom; or *plural* and *collective* — gazing into a mirror in the Fang Mbiri-Bwiti initiation ritual that Fernandez describes here. With regard to any given cultural performance, reflexivity may be *internal* — a story within a story or a play within a play that comments on the performance within which it is performed; or *external* — the curtain rising or the 'once upon a time' frame that tells us that this is a play or a story. The reflexivity of collective representations may be *implicit*, as is the sociocultural metacommentary of the Balinese cockfight that Geertz (1973) has described, or it may be *explicit*, as is the metacommentary of the Sinhalese demonic curing and the Pueblo clown performance that Handelman and Kapferer describe here. It may be *partial*, as in the case of an ethnographic film about an African sect that includes some reference to the filmmaker and the process of filmmaking, or *total*, in the case of a film about making a film such as Truffaut's *Day for Night* where the subject is the film itself.

These are but a few of the distinctions that are frequently confounded by specific significations in specific contexts. But, we could and should go on, for what is needed is a much more systematic and refined classification of different types and aspects of reflexivity, as well as different ways of looking at various cultural mirrors which are all, not everywhere the same. Reflexivity is a seductive and suggestive concept which — if one doesn't get lost in the hall of mirrors — can illuminate very different systems of signification. The papers in the original symposium and those in this volume are a step in this direction. All deal with different instances of reflexivity and all do so from very different perspectives.

One cannot, in our Western world, talk about self, self-reflection, or

reflexivity without evoking the name of Narcissus. This figure of Greek mythology has become an intellectual and affective complex that is indicative of the role of self and self-reflection at various stages in our culture. As our conceptions of self-love and self-knowledge change, so do our readings of the myth. In the first essay in this volume, Marilyn DiSalvo discusses the earliest written versions of the legend, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Conon's ΔΙΗΓΗΣΕΙΣ. We do well to return to Ovid with her, for the story is considerably more complex than the image of pathological self-love or autoeroticism that we are apt to recall. As Ovid retells it, the myth involves a dialectic of cognition and desire, and a transformation of vital self-knowledge into destructive self-love and a deadly confusion of shadow and reality.

James Fernandez is equally concerned with the frustrations of obtaining objective self-awareness, and in his essay we have shifted from a reflecting pool in a mythological coppice to the real and recent use of mirrors and mirroring pools in African ritual contexts. In the Fang Mbiri-Bwiti initiation ritual he describes, there are significant analogues to the story of Narcissus: the reflected image of the initiate's own face becomes transformed in his drug-induced state into the significant other of the ancestor with whom the religious or curing cult is seeking communication. Once this identification occurs, the initiate can pass on to a new state of being. This African use of mirrors — and their widespread use in rites of transformation — is particularly interesting given Thomas W. Moore's recent (1976) rereading of the myth of Narcissus as a positive story of the process of self-transformation. One of the significant general points that Fernandez makes, echoing an earlier remark by Merleau-Ponty, is that because of its 'trickiness', the mirror is a device which easily becomes a repository of significance. If collective representations are mirrors, mirrors are also collective representations. Throughout the world, the mirror is 'an artifact which is central and crucial to the achievement of identity' (p. 35). And, paradoxically, it is 'perhaps the fundamental device on which to base a sociable life' (p. 37).

If DiSalvo and Fernandez are concerned with the more serious aspects and consequences of reflexivity in myth and ritual, Handelman and Kapferer are concerned with its more humorous, but equally serious, modes in a Sinhalese demonic curing ritual and a Tewa clown performance. In both cases their focus is on the reflexive attributes of clown-figures, and thus on what Brecht called the 'deep comedy of meta-language'. Both these rituals are rites of transition, which they regard as highly reflexive events. Further, they assert that the key dynamic in any transforming ritual is symbolic types — in this case horrific and humorous Sinhalese demons and Pueblo sacred clowns. Such symbolic types endow

the ritual state with a degree of reflexivity, of metacommunication through which it is able to comment to itself about its ongoing progression, as well as commenting on the social and cosmological orders. Inconsistency within symbolic types is expressive of transformations taking place in context and is productive of further transformation. There has been much talk about reflexivity in ritual, but rarely, if ever, has this dynamic been so closely scrutinized.

Riv-Ellen Prell-Foldes discusses another, and contemporary, Western ritual dynamic: the reinvention of reflexivity in Jewish prayer in a Sabbath community founded in 1971. As she points out, prayer offers a unique ritual occasion for reflexivity, for contemplating and constructing a self integrated with cultural norms. 'Whatever the style of the prayer or the particular script of the culture, prayer and the act of praying engage the participant in public and private statements about his or her relationship to the community, and the community's place in the world' (p. 73). But what happens when modern worshippers experience dissatisfaction with liturgical language and concepts because they do not embrace the members' contemporary context, and hence frustrate the reflexive dimension of prayer? Her essay is concerned with precisely this dilemma, with the substantial differences in prayer's reflexivity for the 'religious' and the 'psychological' self, and with how in this specific context it was resolved. Interestingly enough, it turns out not to be a matter of changing the mirror, but of slightly altering the context in which it is placed and reinterpreting its reflections.

In the following essay, Barbara Myerhoff and Deena Metzger discuss the quest for self-meaning and significance in the private reflections of the journal rather than the public mirrors of ritual. Despite its solitary nature, however, journal-keeping is also a rite of passage, a process in which the self may be constructed, scrutinized, reconstructed, transformed, and led into new regions of awareness, just as the Fang initiate passes into a new state of awareness through the mirror. Both as an 'activity' which they present and a 'genre' that they talk about, the journal is reflexive and liminal — of necessity a protean, radically open form. In recent years, however, this mode of reflexivity has become a public as well as a private act. Both in the women's movement and in diverse psychotherapeutic contexts, journals are used collectively as well as privately as a means of objectifying self-awareness, and of sharing with others the dialogue one has with oneself.

While journals are explicitly reflexive, the 'ephemeral art' that occurs in ritual contexts throughout the world is, Marilyn Ravicz argues, an important implicit form of cultural reflexivity. Her study is concerned with those visual aesthetic phenomena that are created or assembled with the

conscious knowledge that they will be destroyed, dismantled, or permitted to decompose within hours, days, or months. All this work and attention to aesthetic detail for a single significant occasion involves both makers and percipients in relearning and recelebrating deeply meaningful cultural symbols and allows them 'to participate reflexively in the constructed, non-necessary character of presumably god-given worlds' (Rosaldo 1976: 3). As Handelman and Kapferer have pointed out, anthropologists have talked a great deal about the learning and transformation that occurs in ritual and considerably less about *how* it occurs. Ravicz concurs and argues that the 'epistemic arousal' and 'effective surprise' of ephemeral aesthetic phenomena enhance ritualized communications and intensify consciousness toward self and society and the aesthetic impulse itself.

Robert Schultz is also concerned with how self-reflexive relations are involved in our apprehension of works of art, but unlike the other contributors to this volume, he is explicitly concerned with the logic of self-reflexive relations, and thus with the question of semantic paradoxes and of Goedel's theorem and the concepts of 'diagonalization' and 'mirroring'. The latter has implications that go far beyond mathematics, for 'when self-reflexiveness is involved, *sometimes* the conditions of the problem, carefully enough stated, *are* the solution' (p. 142). Following his discussion of logic, Schultz turns to Hollywood films for examples of the different forms in which self-reflexiveness can manifest itself. He groups these forms into three sets of distinctions: (1) a *structural* distinction between 'grounded' and 'ungrounded' self-reflexiveness; (2) a *phenomenological* distinction between 'healthy' and 'diseased' self-reflexiveness; and (3) a *practical* distinction between 'informative' and 'uninformative' self-reflexiveness. The distinctions are interesting in themselves; what is even more interesting are the various combinations among the sets in different works of art. He concludes with a brief but important discussion of the ethical implications of the 'healthy/diseased' distinction that is relevant to any consideration of reflexivity and of the relation of consciousness to the world.

Jay Ruby takes a different approach to the issue of reflexivity and film, focusing on ethnographic film and the problem of reflexivity in anthropological modes of presentation. He argues that anthropologists have an ethical as well as an aesthetic and scientific obligation to be reflexive and self-critical about their work: 'anyone who recognizes that self-reflection, as mediated linguistically, is integral to the characterization of human social conduct, must acknowledge that such holds also for his own activities as a social "analyst", "researcher", etc.' (Giddens 1976: 8). Unfortunately, because of the naive empiricism and positivism of American social science, most anthropologists have not recognized this

argument, or have been enjoined against expressing it by the 'scientific' conventions of ethnographic presentation. Reflexive remarks, if they are made at all, tend to be made *outside* the study of an Other. Insofar, however, as ethnography and documentary film are what 'we' do to 'them', it is important to practice and 'to include as far as possible this disciplined self-awareness in observations on other lives and other cultures' (M. Mead 1976: 907). Contrary to popular opinion, it is necessary to be reflexive if one is to be scientific.

In his concluding comments, Roy Rappaport reiterates the necessity for finer distinctions in our analyses of reflexive modes and proceeds to make them in his discussion of some of the papers in this volume and of reflexivity in ritual generally. With regard to various modes of self-construction and reconstruction, he suggests that there are important differences as well as similarities between the reflexivity of a modern, private journal and that of a traditional public ritual of transformation. First, the image of the journal is descriptive, retrospective, and passive while that in the Fang and other ritual mirrors is active, prospective, and prescriptive. Second, the agent of transformation in ritual, in contrast to journal, is *outside* oneself. Third, journals may or may not represent elaborate public orders; the mirrors of ritual always do. To make a statement about oneself to oneself in the pages of a journal is a very different matter from participating in a public ritual in which a culture makes a statement to itself about itself, but both are reflexive modes and their similarities as well as differences merit attention. His discussion of ritual is equally suggestive and implies that we can neither conceive nor talk about ritual and religion without talking about reflexivity. Faith is a reflexive process, emergent like Mead's 'self' from the dialectic between 'I' and 'me'. Morality, sanctity, and the concept of the divine itself may well be established by ritual's reflexivity: 'Gods ... are created reflexively by the words attributed to them' (p. 190). Ultimate meaning is not referential, it is reflexive, as Kant suggested in his theory of transcendental reflection.

Since I began this introduction with a paradoxical statement, let me conclude with another from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* and reflect on it:

Here we can see that solipsism coincides with pure realism, if it is strictly thought out. The I of solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and what remains is the reality co-ordinate with it. (1969: 82e)

What this statement points to is the difference between 'metaphysical solipsism', with which we are all familiar, which claims that the individual is the sole reality, and 'methodological solipsism', which claims that the proper method of philosophy calls for the examination of all experience

from an egological perspective (Natanson 1974b: 241). Methodological solipsism investigates the essential character of the mundane, and as Wittgenstein implies, 'the duality of self and world, understood as the relationship between consciousness and social reality, can be undercut by the phenomenological concept of intentionality' (Natanson 1974b: 243). All object-consciousness is also self-consciousness and vice-versa.

If, as I argued earlier, all systems of signification are inherently and necessarily reflexive, so too are our interpretations of those other signs. But, fearing charges of solipsism and subjectivism, we shy away from the methodological solipsism that Wittgenstein and the phenomenologists endorse. We talk about reflexive relations in logic, in Hollywood films, in African rituals, in narrative, but rarely do we turn the mirror on ourselves. Few of us would dare to admit with Paul Ricoeur that all interpretation is, 'explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others', and 'it is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that the exegete pursues through his understanding of the other' (1974: 17). But it is, and to deny this ineluctable reflexivity is to be less than humanistic and less than scientific. The only cure for subjectivity is reflexivity, which is 'more and better subjectivity, more discriminating, and more self-critical subjectivity, which will show the very limits of subjectivity' (Spiegelberg 1969: 142) ... the extensionless point.

Notes

1. Like many of the contributions to this volume, the original version of this paper was presented in the 1976 AAA Symposium, 'Rituals and myths of self: Uses of and occasions for reflexivity', organized by Barbara Myerhoff and Michelle Rosaldo. I am indebted to both of them for prompting us to put our thoughts together. I am particularly indebted to Shelly Rosaldo, many of whose comments have informed this introduction. My debt to Victor Turner is large and long-standing, for he forced me to regard reflexivity as something other than a literary matter and to attend to its ritual and social uses. More immediately, I am especially grateful to Keith Basso for criticism and support, and to Douglas W. Schwartz and the School of American Research for providing a place to reflect and collect these thoughts on reflexivity.
2. For a brilliant discussion of metacommunication and Epimenides's paradox in relation to a theory of play and fantasy, see Bateson 1972.
3. In her original comments on this symposium, Shelly Rosaldo (1976: 3) similarly remarked: 'Playing with commonsense structures — through self-reflection in any form — must take us somewhere beyond them, opening, for the truly curious, a critical view of themselves'.

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