CHAPTER 8

Reflecting on Reflections: Cinema's Complex Mirror Shots

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INTRODUCTION: A COMPLEX MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL[1]

Let us begin with a scene from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's superb black-and-white literary adaptation *Effi Briest* (1974). The camera faces a mirror that fills almost the entire screen. In the mirror – a conspicuous frame-within-the-frame – we can see the reflection of a living room. On the staircase in the background Effi Briest (Hanna Schygulla) leans on the shoulders of her mother (Lilo Pempeit). When Effi's father (Herbert Steinmetz) enters with Baron von Instetten (Wolfgang Schenck) on the right of the mirror reflection, Effi moves down the stairs and kisses her future husband's hand. Throughout the forty-six seconds of this static long-take the viewer can visually perceive the four characters as a reflection in the mirror, but the off-screen characters never enter the on-screen space between the mirror and the camera.

In what follows I will pay close attention to shots like this one, which are particularly prominent in art cinema and modernist films by Dreyer, de Sica, Duras, Resnais, Angelopoulos, Tsai and many others, but can also occur in mainstream films, especially of the more ambitious kind (Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) and Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) come to mind). I call them 'complex mirror shots', by which I mean shots in which characters and other salient sources of attention are *reflected* in the mirror but remain *beyond the screen frame* (and hence were not placed between the mirror and the camera during shooting).[2] Complex mirror shots should be distinguished from the more widespread and less demanding mirror scenes which place the source of attention *between* the mirror and the camera during shooting and which thus allow a character or an object to be glimpsed from different angles simultaneously. Just think of the famous monologue of Robert De Niro's Jake La Motta in Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). Similar to Michel Chion's distinction between *active* and *passive* off-screen sound, we could argue that complex mirror shots *actively* raise our attention to the reflected object or event, whereas in regular mirror shots the off-screen space *passively* 'describes' the environment but does not pose any questions.[3]

Figure 8.1   *Effi Briest*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974).

Figure 8.2   *Effi Briest*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974).

I will show that provided the mirror and its source of reflection assume a prominent role in the shot, they can change the way spectators look *onto*, look *into* and look *beyond* the filmic image, but also look *at* it in a puzzled or questioning way. More concretely this implies that: (1) complex mirror shots

may modify how spectators look *onto* the picture as a flat composition by way of a quasi-transformation of the screen shape; (2) they can function as a magnetising frame-within-the-frame that channels the viewer's look *into* the *anterior depth* of the mirror; (3) by referring us to off-screen space and thus making us look *beyond* the image into its *lateral* and *posterior depth*, some specific examples also allow for an intricately layered experience of perception and imagination, challenging and complicating our effort to 'read' the image; (4) mirrors may, finally, be a source of spatial complication and can even lead to a full-blown disorientation regarding the status of the image, thus transforming the way viewers understand, problematise and look *at* the filmic image as such.[4]

Complication is only one effect, however. In addition, I want to suggest that these mirror shots offer a simultaneous *range of affordances* in terms of what we can do with the filmic image or what it can 'do' to us. Hence, they more readily invite or even force us to oscillate between various viewing modes: from flatness to anterior depth and on to lateral and posterior depth (even though not all options will be available in all instances). Complex mirror shots thus put viewers in an equivocal and protean attitude. It is in this sense – over and above their sometimes disorienting character – that I take them to have an *indefinite* quality.

A Shape Within a Shape: The Mirror as Pictorial Geometrical Form

With the exception of a mirror reflection that fills the entire screen, diegetic mirrors always add a geometrical shape to the image. In the hands of a gifted filmmaker an immediate upshot can be a change in pictorial composition of the image and even a *quasi-transformation* of the shape of the screen. In his fascinating lecture on 'The Dynamic Square' held in 1930, Sergei Eisenstein bemoaned the 'inflexibility of the once and for all inflexible frame proportions of the screen'.[5] Unhappy with the standardised shape of the screen, the Soviet filmmaker wanted to dynamise its form, getting rid of the strong fixture on horizontalism and allowing for a vertical composition as well. In Eisenstein's account this dynamisation is achieved through *masking* parts of the shape of the film screen, but one can also imagine changing the *actual* aspect ratio of the screen (think of Glenn H. Alvey's experimental H. G. Wells adaptation *The Door in the Wall* from 1956).[6] Of course, a variable composition is also the by-product of the change of aspect ratio, for instance through the use of the IMAX format or the split-screen technique.

However, comparable to shots through doorframes or windows, an approximation to what Eisenstein had in mind becomes possible also

Figure 8.3   *Gertrud*, Carl Theodor Dreyer (1964).

through mirrors, even without the use of such technical devices as masking, the change of screen size or split-screen images. What is more, using a mirror shot allows for an opposition, combination, or even fusion of geometrical shapes. This can be seen in the shot from Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964): against the background of a comparatively unobtrusive grey wall, the *vertical* shape of the mirror with its attention-grabbing Rococo frame stands in opposition to – or interacts with – the *horizontal* screen shape.

Following Eisenstein's (masculine) rhetoric, one could say that the screen becomes a 'battlefield' on which optically spatial conflicts and skirmishes are fought. Put in less martial terms: various shapes stand either in tension or harmony to each other. As Christian Metz puts it: 'The internal frame, the *second* frame, has the effect of drawing attention to the main frame [. . .] of which it is, among other things, a frequent and recognizable "marker"'.[7] Apart from rectangular mirrors a variety of other forms may influence the image composition as well: an oval, a circle, a rhomb etc. The mirror-obsessed Fassbinder was particularly inventive in this respect. Just take a look at the scenes shown here from *Veronika Voss* (1982), but also from Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961) or Steven Soderbergh's *Che: Part 1* (2008).

Slanted angles can further modify the geometrical shape of the mirror within the overall composition, as when Theo Angelopoulos, in a bar scene in *The Suspended Step of the Stork* (1991), films a dangling mirror slightly from the side (see below). In short, introducing a mirror as a prominent part of the *mise-en-scène* allows for a modification of how the viewer may *look onto* the

Figure 8.4 *Veronika Voss*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1982).

Figure 8.5 *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année dernière à Marienbad)*, Alain Resnais (1961).

Figure 8.6 *Che: Part 1*, Steven Soderbergh (2008).

Figure 8.7 *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, Theo Angelopoulos (1991).

filmic image as a *flat composition*. This is by no means to imply that mirrors make viewers avoid looking *into* the filmic world; nor will spectators easily switch from the looking-*into* to the looking-*onto* mode – after all, a mirror in a film still gives us a Gestalt. All I am arguing is that the looking-onto mode becomes a more vital possibility, as prominent mirrors introduce contrasting geometrical shapes, thus making the image less definite.

A FRAME WITHIN A FRAME: THE MIRROR GUIDING ATTENTION

However, the mirror is not a geometrical shape like any other. Again, apart from mirror reflections that fill the entire screen, diegetic mirrors always add a *frame* within the frame.[8] With Anne Friedberg we can also speak of a 'multiple frame': the edges of the mirror, whether it is surrounded by an actual frame or not, are included within the master frame of the screen – be it a cinema screen, a television screen, a computer screen or any other screen on which we watch the film.[9] Following a general function of frames, mirrors as frames-within-the-frame allow a *channelling of the spectator's attention* to what seems salient: deliberately and artificially 'decreasing' the format of the film image, they momentarily magnetise the viewer's gaze and pull it towards what is framed.

In this respect the mirror resembles photographs, paintings or other static, framed representations within the diegesis to which the viewer might be attracted. In contrast to static photographs or paintings, what we see inside the mirror is most of the time not static, since the reflection contains moving

Figure 8.8 *Effi Briest*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974).

parts. Particularly when movement *within* the mirror is set off from a static wall *surrounding* the mirror, the magnetising function will most likely increase, 'sucking' the viewer's attention towards what is framed to a considerably higher degree than a photograph or a painting. This is predominantly the case with those complex mirror shots that do not contain a character between the camera and the mirror at all but restrict themselves to showing its reflection: what can be glimpsed inside the mirror remains the only *moving* part of the image, and the viewer therefore does not have to divide his or her attention, as in this scene from Fassbinder's *Effi Briest*. Here the surrounding wall is hardly important – what counts is the moving mirror reflection of the characters, accentuated by the rectangular mirror frame.

Again, the mirror resembles doorframes and windows in this respect: it is as if the mirror 'opened up' what would otherwise be a flat wall by inserting a visible 'hole' into it, channelling the viewers' attention into its anterior depth of field. The specular depth of field can reach spectacularly far, as in the bedroom scene from *Effi Briest* with Hanna Schygulla and Irm Hermann below. Or it can remain almost on the 'surface', as in the mirror reflection of Emmanuelle Riva standing closely in front of a bathroom mirror in *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959).
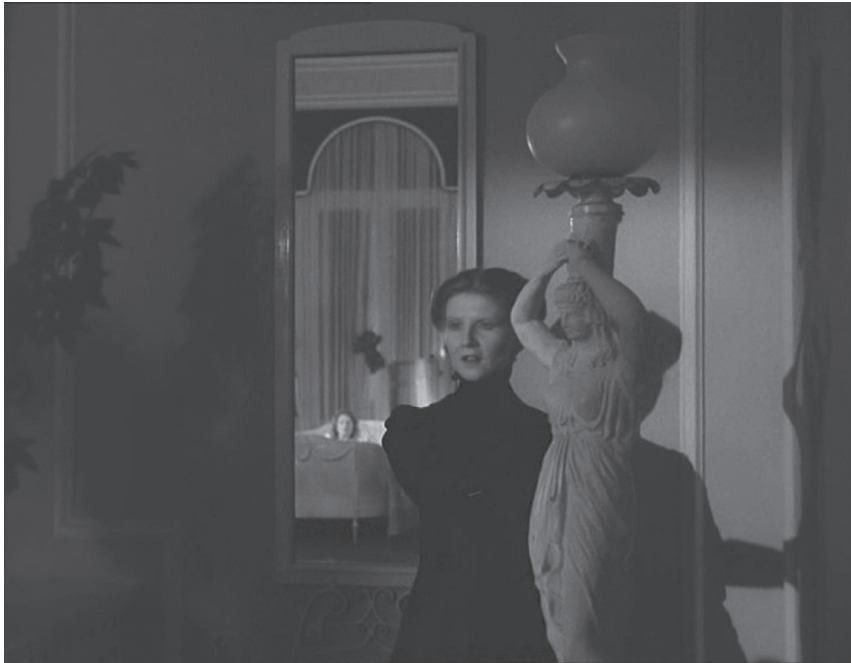
Figure 8.9 *Effi Briest*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974).

Figure 8.10 *Hiroshima mon amour*, Alain Resnais (1959).

Here it is important, however, to heed Umberto Eco's warning that a mirror reflection is a *virtual image*: 'it is so called because the observer perceives it as if it were inside the mirror, while, of course, the mirror has no "inside"'.[10] One looks at the mirror reflection as if it had an anterior depth

of field reaching 'into' the virtual image and thus functions like a window or a doorframe beyond which *space seems to be extending away* from the camera. However, while perceptually correct, this is logically wrong: Not having depth itself, a mirror merely gives us the depth of the space it is reflecting. (And this realisation may also allow for a momentary flattening of the screen itself, because we subtly feel reminded of the fact that the screen does not have 'real' depth either.)

At the same time, frames-within-the-frame such as mirrors tend to result in a constriction or, at least, delimitation of space inside the filmic image. By 'devaluing' those parts that surround the mirror frame, mirrors can have an 'emphasising' function, but also a 'suffocating' effect: what is salient is given a marked and demarcated space, but through the demarcation of the frame it also robs us of what could otherwise be a more open view. To make this more tangible, let us take a look at a shot from *Hiroshima mon amour*. Although the male protagonist (played by Eiji Okada) can be seen at the very centre of the image, we instantly realise that the *mirror frame* inside the film frame off-centres (or decentres) him and relegates him to the left edge of the mirror reflection and thereby cuts off a part of his head and torso.

Following Pascal Bonitzer's influential concept of deframing (*décadrage*),

Figure 8.11 *Hiroshima mon amour*, Alain Resnais (1959).

there is a centrifugal tendency of the mirror image toward off-screen space in as much as it hints at the parts of the character's body that lie beyond the *mirror* frame.[11] Or to use a phrase by Jean Mitry: 'We know that the space seen through the frame and *limited* by it is in no way *delimited* by it'.[12]

Hence we encounter a curious double tendency to open up and constrict space: Mirrors seem to squeeze and box-in what can be seen inside the four borders of their frame, but simultaneously extend the space of the image to what is 'inside' their 'depth'. Mitry, discussing a mirror scene in John Ford's *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935), also observes this constricting effect: 'Whereas a total field of view would underline the relations between various points in space shown in its entirety, here, on the contrary everything is hemmed in, constricted.'[13] However, for reasons we will arrive at presently, it seems wrong to me when Mitry claims that 'space is cancelled out, since it is its reflection we see'.[14] In fact, space is not cancelled out, but it is transformed.

What seems clear at this point is that a viewer who looks *into* the depth of the mirror-as-frame naturally perceives the image differently from a viewer who looks *onto* the flatness of the mirror-as-geometrical-shape. A crucial *shift of attention* takes place, implying a reordering of the given well described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

> To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*. [. . .] The miracle of consciousness consists in its bringing to light, through attention, phenomena which re-establish the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment when they destroy it.[15]

I suggest that mirrors are the kind of diegetic object that 'invites' this switching of attention or even forcefully 'imposes' it. It would be wrong, however, to consider the two possibilities as necessarily exclusive – they can coexist, with one mode foregrounded while the other one is backgrounded and vice versa.

A SPACE WITHIN A SPACE: THE MIRROR AND SPATIAL EXTENSION

A mirror is an *indexical* medium: it contains a causal connection between its referent and what it displays. But unlike the indexical medium of photography it is not a storage medium that allows us to retrieve what the virtual image of the mirror reflection has previously shown. This implies that if the reflected object is not located between the mirror and the camera, it must be positioned *at this very moment* in what Noël Burch, in his typology of off-screen space, has called 'the off behind the camera' (and maybe more accurately

should have called 'the off behind and next to the camera').[16] In complex mirror shots characters are thus both *present* on-screen via reflection and simultaneously *absent* in off-screen space. Hence even though the medium of photography and the mirror share the tendency to fuse absence and presence into an image of absent-presence, they are crucially different: photography makes something present that is *temporally absent* (the image was taken earlier in time); in complex mirror shots the mirror makes something present that is *temporally present* but *spatially absent* (what it reflects is located at this very moment in off-screen space).[17]

Hence mirrors are intriguing diegetic objects, because they introduce a peculiar pluri-directionality to the filmic image, thus further rendering it more indefinite: mirrors extend space not only into the *anterior* depth of field discussed in the previous section, but also into what André Bazin has called *lateral* depth of field and even into what I want to dub *posterior* depth of field (with reference to Burch we could also speak of the 'depth behind and next to the camera').[18] Umberto Eco therefore describes the mirror as a prosthesis: an 'apparatus extending the range of action of an organ.'[19] The film is thus both off-centred and centred on the off.

We can make these claims more concrete by drawing on a scene from Marguerite Duras' *India Song* (1975), a film ripe with complex mirror shots. Roughly fifty minutes into the film, at the beginning of a static long-take of more than six minutes, the attaché of the Austrian embassy (Mathieu Carrière) stands, hands folded and without moving, in front of a piano in the big, bourgeois living room of the French ambassador to India. He stares into the upper left off-screen space behind the camera. In the background we can see a huge mirror in the shape of a big door or a passage, which covers about a third of the wall. On the left side of the mirror we see a staircase on which the wife of the French ambassador, Anne-Marie Stretter (Delphine Seyrig) appears in a red gown after nineteen seconds. She descends the stairs and appears in the middle of the mirror, approaching the Austrian attaché. Because of the mirror reflection and the direction of the attaché's gaze into off-screen space, we have to expect Anne-Marie Stretter to appear from the left-hand-side of the frame, which she does thirty-five seconds into the shot.

What interests me most about this shot – fully aware that I am shamefully ignoring its multi-layered non-synchronous soundtrack – is how the mirror complicates the act of viewing: during her walk towards the attaché, we can *perceive* the woman in red as a mirror-reflection squarely *inside* the image; but at the same time, guided through the attaché's gaze, we are also asked to *imagine* her approaching from off-screen space *outside* the image. In contrast to other cases mentioned above, the attaché's gaze into off-screen space implies

**Figures 8.12–8.14**   *India Song*, Marguerite Duras (1975).

a strong deictic element, pointing in an outward direction. Over and above the reflection in the mirror his gazes adds a forceful beyond-the-frame-focus that asks for an actualisation of that space, and how else would we actualise it other than via imagination? While in the *Effi Briest* example at the beginning viewers will predominantly apprehend the mirror reflection, in cases with a strong beyond-the-frame-focus imagination comes into play to a much stronger degree, actualising that visible–invisible space.

Hence for the viewer's engagement with indefinite filmic images it makes a difference if the images contain (a) *no character* placed between camera and mirror during shooting, (b) a character that looks *at the reflection* in on-screen space or (c) a character that gazes at *the source of the reflection* in off-screen space. Take the following shots from Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956) and Vittorio de Sica's *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, 1970): in one case we have an inward character gaze, in the other two cases we see a character looking outward.

With Bazin's distinction between a *centripetal* and a *centrifugal* image tendency in mind, we may assume that the direction of the character's gaze may either attenuate or spur the viewer's imagining of off-screen space.[20] In the first case the viewer most likely follows the gaze direction 'into' the depth of the mirror; in the other two cases his or her attention may be pushed beyond the image frame into off-screen space and thus increase the reliance on his or her imagination, similar to the *India Song* example. For lack of a better expression we could speak of an 'imaginative perception', because the viewer's perception of the mirror shot is informed and infused by imaginative elements to a more pronounced degree than usual: the imagination of off-screen space. Thus complex mirror shots not only change the way spectators look *onto* and *into* the image, but also *beyond* it.

At the beginning I emphasised that for a mirror shot to change the way spectators look *onto*, *into*, *beyond* and *at* the filmic image the objects and events reflected in the mirror must play a prominent role. This is an important qualifier because most regular mirror shots of the *Raging Bull* kind also reveal some space behind the character. But the rest of Jake LaMotta's locker room is rather unimportant to our understanding of the scene.[21] As mentioned, in regular mirror shots the reflection of off-screen space *passively* displays the environment but does not pose questions.[22] In complex mirror shots, on the other hand, a salient source like Anne-Marie Stretter in her red dress attracts our attention and therefore asks to be *actively* concretised in imagination, even if the content of this imagination is strongly shaped by what is given through perception in the mirror.

Cognitive film theorists like David Bordwell, Edward Branigan and others have shown us that as viewers we need to mentally *construct* the space
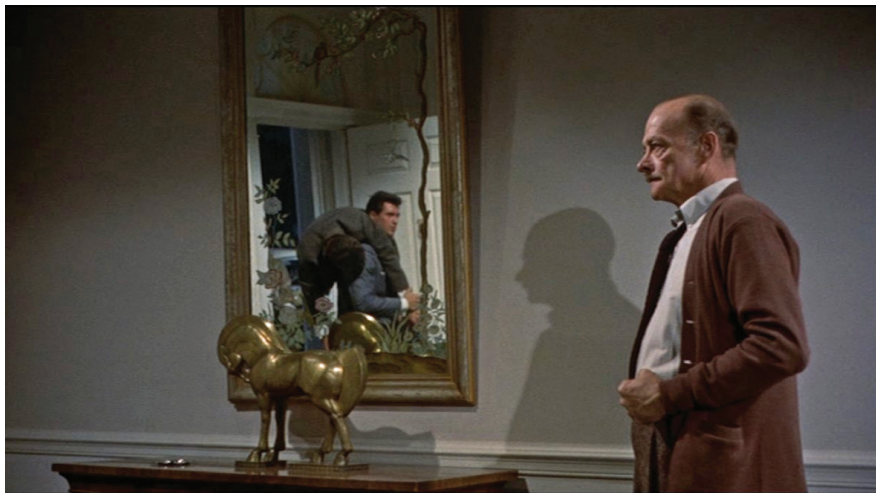
Figures 8.15–8.16   *Written on the Wind*, Douglas Sirk (1956).

Figure 8.17   *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis (Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini)*, Vittorio de Sica (1970).

of the filmic world: Drawing on mental schemata partly derived from our experience of reality we fill in the gaps that any film necessarily contains.[23] Likewise, phenomenological aesthetics – think of Roman Ingarden, Mikel Dufrenne or Wolfgang Iser – has time and again underlined the active part of the recipient who has to concretise spots of indeterminacy or fill in blanks.[24] Accordingly, I would argue that in order to make full sense of the *actual*, non-reflected spatial configuration in the living room of *India Song*, the viewer needs to visualise in imagination an inverse version of the reflected woman in red in off-screen space.

Incidentally, and not surprisingly, complex mirror shots also imply a doubling or ambiguity in terms of sound. Even though complex mirror shots existed during the silent era, the use of sound adds another layer.[25] To better describe how viewers experience sound in complex mirror shots we need to draw on an intricate phenomenon Chion calls '*spatial magnetization*'.[26] The phenomenon occurs when the *place* of a sound source we *see* and the *location* where the sound is actually *emitted* do not coincide. For example, a barking dog runs from the right to the left of the onscreen image and then exits into off-screen space: We automatically and without a reflective thought mentally attach the sound to the moving dog (as the *source* of the sound) and not to the static speakers (as the *emitters* of the sound). In Chion's elegant phrasing, 'the image attracts the sound, as though magnetically, and leads us mentally to situate the sound where we see its source'.[27] Without spatial magnetisation we would be unable to create a realistic connection between the static loudspeaker and the often moving sound sources inside and outside the image. This is particularly obvious in the case of monaural sound, i.e., when only one speaker exists behind the screen, but also when we watch a film on a computer monitor via headphones. Only because the on-screen or off-screen source seems to magnetically pull the sound in its direction can we make sense of and follow the film at all.

Complex mirror shots make this phenomenon even more intriguing. All of a sudden the film *doubles*, as it were, its sound source. Or, to be more precise, the mirror lets the sound source appear *ambiguously*, because it is visible *inside* the frame, but has to be logically located *outside* the frame. Depending on what aspect the viewer focuses on, I claim, the spatial experience of sound will be different. If the viewer concentrates on the *reflection* and hence what goes on 'inside' the anterior depth of the mirror, the sound will come directly from the *front*. If the viewer focuses on the *actual location* of the characters and hence on what goes on in the lateral or posterior depth of off-screen space, the sound source will be magnetised to the imagined position of the characters. The spatial experience of sound will vary slightly, even though the emitter of sound stays, of course, the same.

Doubled Depth of Field and Intensified Staging in Depth

In the complex mirror shots from *Effi Briest* or *India Song* the camera is situated halfway between the mirror and the characters in the *hors-champ*. I have already alluded to the fact that the complex mirror shot thus may extend the depth of the image into various directions: not only into the anterior depth 'inside' the mirror on-screen, but also the lateral depth next to the camera and the posterior depth behind the camera off-screen. In the following I want to show how this may help us to shed a different light on the discussion of depth of field and the way it allows filmmakers to stage in depth, a stylistic device variously discussed by David Bordwell.[28]

Consider the following shot from Fassbinder's *Effi Briest*, which shows us mirror reflections of Hanna Schygulla and Wolfgang Schenck in the background as well as Irm Hermann in the foreground.

Here the mirror allows for a guided depth of field comparable to other types of *surcadrages* like a doorframe or a window (see the section 'A Frame Within a Frame' above). However, what distinguishes the complex mirror shot from regular depth-of-field shots is the space it opens up in the reverse direction. Against the background of what I have pointed out above, the

Figure 8.18 *Effi Briest*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974).

depth of field must immediately be *doubled* once we take into account the posterior depth of field or '~~depth~~ behind the camera'. The camera is centred as in the middle of a corridor. With space extending in two directions the shot yields an *amplified* depth of field and thus makes possible an *intensified* staging in depth.[29]

What is more, the complex mirror shot allows for an intricate editing-without-editing. To elucidate this point let us briefly take a detour via Pascal Bonitzer's Bazin-inspired comparison between painting and film. According to Bonitzer, paintings place the beholder in an *overlooking* position, whereas editing puts the film audience, as it were, *inside* the scene: 'in film we are not outside but within the painting. We travel, through the different shot sizes and angles, inside a painting without edges, a painting which creates itself and is only limited by time'.[30] Now, to me it seems that this is also, and particularly, an intriguing description for the mirror shot, as the mirror helps to locate the viewer in a space *as if inside the scene*, but *without the use of editing*. Via the mirror reflection we can see – all at once and without a cut – Effi and Instetten on the floor and Johanna both in profile and from the front. The temporal duration is not interrupted, and the spatial integrity remains untouched from changes in perspective.[31]

In his forceful critique of Bazin, Jean-Louis Comolli questions the Bazinian claim that a depth-of-field aesthetics is able to capture reality more faithfully than one based on editing. Comolli insists instead on its artificiality and constructedness: 'We could [. . .] go so far as to reverse Bazin's hypothesis and claim that depth of field, far from manifesting a "surplus reality," actually enables the filmmaker to show less of the real, to play around with masking effects and visual tricks, as well as with the division and distortion of space…'[32] If Comolli's critique rings true – at least for some examples of depth of field – then it is all the more true for complex mirror shots. A quick glance at a highly artificial double depth-of-field shot from Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* may lend evidence to this claim: here Rock Hudson, reflected in the mirror and standing in the background, is framed four times – by the screen frame, by Lauren Bacall and Robert Stack, by the mirror frame and by the doorframe. More than in regular depth-of-field shots 'the director and cameraman have converted the screen into a dramatic checkerboard', as Bazin once put it.[33]

On top of allowing a type of editing-without-editing the mirror incidentally also enables a split-screen without the splicing of two shots via optical printer.[34] Take Darius Khondji's brilliant mirror shot at the end of James Gray's *The Immigrant* (2013). What we can see is a three-part image: a flat wall on the left, an *anterior* depth of field outside a window in the middle, and an *anterior–posterior* depth of field in the mirror on the right. While in
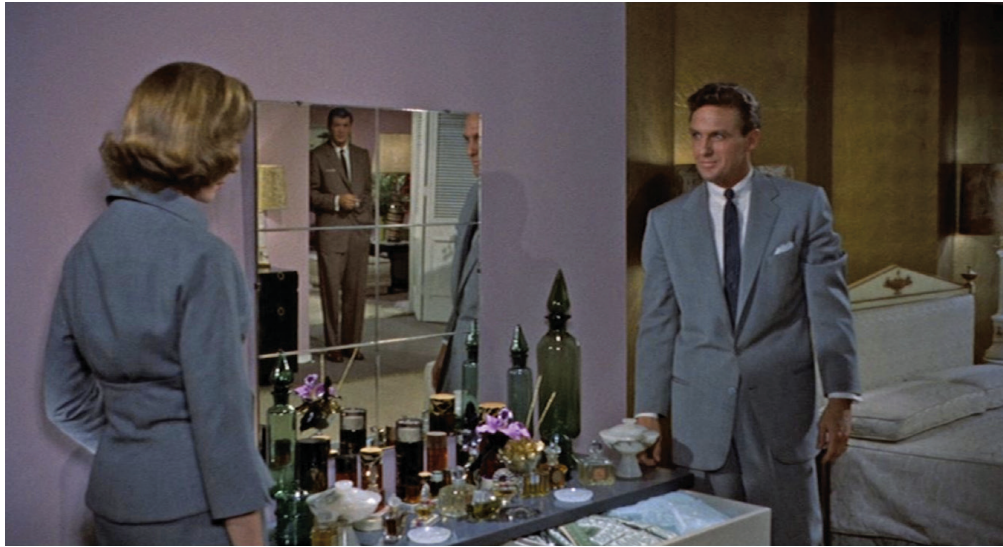
Figure 8.19 *Written on the Wind*, Douglas Sirk (1956).

the middle Ewa Cybulska (Marion Cotillard) sails away with her sister into freedom, Bruno Weiss (Joaquin Phoenix) walks into a confined, narrow world, symbolised by the constricting composition with various lattices and frames-within-frames-within-frames. Khondjis's complex mirror shot thus allows for – maybe even pushes us towards – an oscillation between the three viewing modes discussed so far: from looking *onto* its flat triptych composition to looking *into* the anterior depth of the mirror (and the window) to looking *beyond* the image into the off behind the camera. And the Khondji example also illustrates a specific propensity of the complex mirror shot: since it takes time to orient oneself in filmic space and to initiate the onto–into–beyond oscillation, complex mirror shots are often connected to the long-take.

Figure 8.20 *The Immigrant*, James Gray (2013).

SPATIAL COMPLICATION AND DISORIENTATION: FOREGROUNDING THE MIRROR'S MEDIATION

Finally, mirrors harbour a potential to unsettle the ways spectators look *at* the image as such by making them insecure about the *status* of the image or the *spatial construction* of its *mise-en-scène*. In fact, the complex mirror shot can profoundly disorient the viewer and thereby foreground the act of viewing and mediation. Here I broadly distinguish between three strategies of mirror disorientation.

First, a filmmaker can use *unusual mirror imagery*, which due to its unfamiliarity demands a reorientation in space and thus a re-evaluation of what can be seen. Take the final scene in Tsai Ming-liang's splendid slow film *Journey to the West* (2014). This completely static long-take of four minutes and thirty-two seconds complicates the viewing experience by confronting us with a huge mirror on a *ceiling* near the entrance of a metro station in Marseilles. Since we are much less habituated to mirrors on ceilings than on walls, both in films and in real life, this complicates our orientation in space, at least initially. Moreover, it also affects the concretisation of off-screen space, as we would have to mentally rotate the mirror reflection not horizontally but *vertically*. Although we might realise from the beginning that we are dealing with a mirror shot here, it needs some adjustment of the lived-body to the visual complexity of the image upside-down. In Tsai's case the complication also derives from the fact that the mirror is not framed and only two of its four edges can be seen: the two segments of the image, the houses below and the mirror above, appear fused, almost in a collage-like


Figure 8.21   *Journey to the West*, Tsai Ming-liang (2014).

way. The two segments thus seem assembled as if in a unitary image, but at the same time the viewer has to deal with two different spatial depths: a horizontal and a vertical one.

Second, films can disorient through the sheer *quantity of mirrors*. Already in 1939 the director William de Mille (the older brother of Cecil B.) noted that 'mirror shots, always the directors' darlings, became so rampant that the audience frequently had trouble untangling the scene from its reflection'.[35] Once we are confronted with an overabundance of mirrors – as in *Effi Briest* or *Veronika Voss* – taking reality for its reflection and vice versa can be a consequence. Above I have referred to the similarity of mirrors to door frames and windows: after numerous mirror scenes in *Effi Briest* I, sure enough, mistook a doorframe for a mirror frame and thus understood a straightforward scene filmed from one room into another to be a reflection. In contrast to the first type of disorientation the viewer is now taken by surprise about the misjudgement, with the potential effect that henceforth the status of the image will be under increased scrutiny: is this a mirror or not?

The third strategy concerns the *size of the mirror*: sometimes filmmakers deliberately place the camera so close to the mirror surface that the mirror fills the entire screen. If a mirror stretches beyond the four edges of the screen, however, we cannot distinguish the mirror image from the 'real' image (unless, of course, there are straightforward signs, such as writing that appears in inverted form). The image thus lacks the guiding frame-within-the-frame composition we encountered in earlier examples. When the audience is initially not aware of the mirror and takes it to be a regular shot without reflection, the subsequent *revelation* of the mirror frame by way of a camera movement, a zoom-out or a repositioning of a character can have, again, a jolting effect. Here we are dealing with the opposite of the previous case: what was taken for a regular shot all of a sudden turns into a mirror shot, as in the example from *India Song* below. In such cases, it seems as if the filmmaker – for whatever reasons – wanted to disorient the audience, but also to let the spectators experience an unusual metamorphosis of space and a certain wonder associated with this spatial transformation.

Some filmmakers even seem to play with our forgetfulness about the status of the mirror image. In video artist Ulla von Brandenburg's *Mirrorsong* (*Spiegellied*, 2012), for instance, the mirror frame is in plain sight at first, before a camera movement toward the mirror slowly relegates the mirror frame into off-screen space. When I watched the film for the first time I was taken by surprise when the frame came back into sight: I had simply forgotten that I was watching the very mirror the title hints at. What von Brandenburg's film
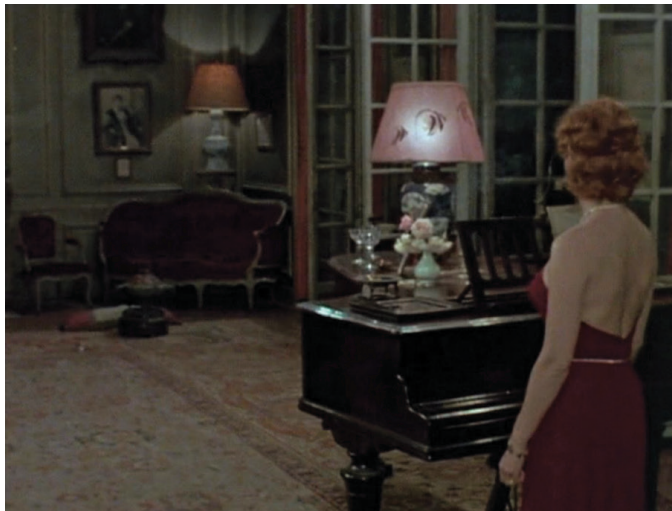
Figures 8.22–8.24 *India Song*, Marguerite Duras (1975).

Figure 8.25 *Mirrorsong* (*Spiegellied*), Ulla von Brandenburg (2012). Courtesy of Produzentengalerie Hamburg.

teaches us is that it demands a sustained act of focusing on the status of the image by keeping the mirror in working memory. Otherwise we can easily lose the mirror image, literally, out of sight, looking *into* the image, but not *beyond* it.[36]

Making the audience insecure about the *status* of the image or the *spatial construction* of its *mise-en-scène* can lead to a rupture in perception and subsequently initiate an act of reflecting on the reflection. Complex mirror shots, in other words, allow the spectator to become consciously aware of his/her own *act of viewing*. At the same time, these shots ostensibly foreground the *act of mediation* by drawing attention to the camera and its position in the profilmic space as well as the space off-screen that can and cannot be seen at the same time. If a director aims at maximising the impression of transparent mediation, using a mirror would be counterproductive as it raises the question of why the director doesn't show us the scene directly.

It is in this double reflexivity – becoming conscious of one's act of looking and the medium itself – that we find a reason why filmmakers like Sirk, Fassbinder or Duras are fond of complex mirror shots, over and above a thematic use of the mirror as a motif of self-reflection, narcissism or questioning of fractured identity. Although one should always be suspicious of giving too much weight to etymological arguments, it may be appropriate, at the very end, to point out that the Latin word *reflectere* is used both for the mirroring effect and the act of contemplation.[37] Oscillating between looking *onto*, *into*, *beyond* and *at* in puzzled or contemplative ways: it is in this potentially equivo-

cal and protean engagement with the filmic image that we find the indefinite character of the complex mirror shot.

Notes

1. For helpful comments on draft versions on this article, I thank Tom Gunning, Christian Ferencz-Flatz, Erika Balsom, Guido Kirsten, Julian Blunk and Vivian Sobchack.

2. Complex mirror shots can coincide with, but are often something other than what Christian Metz has called a *nonreflective mirror*, that is, a mirror that 'reflects something other than the person who looks at it and acts simply as a secondary screen'. Christian Metz, 'Mirrors', in *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1991] 2016), p. 61.

3. Michel Chion, *Film, a Sound Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 481–2.

4. In film studies little attention has been paid to what mirrors imply for the pictorial composition, the organisation of filmic space and the spectator's viewing activity in a given shot. For a few remarks in this direction, see Metz' short chapter on mirrors mentioned in Note 2. For a helpful historical study, see Yuri Tsivian, 'Portraits, Mirrors, Death: On Some Decadent Clichés in Early Russian Films', *Iris*, No. 14–15 (1992), pp. 67–83. The research situation is very different with regard to painting. In art history an enormous body of work has been devoted to the function of mirrors in the image composition. Just think of the manifold discussions of Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage Portrait* (1434), Diego Velasquez' *Las Meninas* (1656) or Edgar Manet's *Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1882). See, for instance, Jan Bialostocki, 'Man and Mirror in Paintings: Reality and Transience', in Irving Lavin and John Plummer (eds), *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*. Vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 61–72.

5. Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Dynamic Square', in his *Film Essays and a Lecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 48–65; p. 49.

6. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yU993U_rWj4 (accessed 4 November 2016).

7. Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation,* p. 53.

8. On frames-within-the frame in the cinema, see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 200–2. See also Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 220.

9. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window,* p. 202.

10. Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 205. On mirrors as virtual images, see also Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1985] 1989), pp. 68–70. Here Deleuze also discusses mirror images as subtypes of the crystal image.

11. Pascal Bonitzer, 'Deframings', in David Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma – Volume*

4: 1973–1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 197–203.

12. Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, [1963] 2000), p. 75.

13. Mitry, *Aesthetics*, p. 198.

14. Ibid.

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, [1945] 2002), p. 35.

16. Noël Burch, 'Nana, or the Two Kinds of Space', in *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 17–31; p. 17.

17. Eco therefore describes the photographic plate as a 'freezing mirror', because the reflected referent has 'frozen' on the surface, even after the object has disappeared. Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 222.

18. Bazin coined the term 'lateral depth of field' with reference to Jean Renoir's mobile camera in *La Règle du jeu* (1939), which according to Bazin behaves like an invisible guest in the centre of the action, revealing what is adjacent to the camera with every reframing: 'The rest of the scene, while effectively hidden, should not cease to exist. The action is not bounded by the screen, but merely passes through it.' André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, ed. François Truffaut, trans. W. W. Halsey II and Willian H. Simon (London: W. H. Allen, 1974), p. 89.

19. Eco, *Semiotics*, p. 208. See also Irving Singer, *Cinematic Mythmaking. Philosophy in Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 31 and Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema. A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), p. 117. This characteristic was recognised as early as 1911 as a way to establish film as an art form in its own right. Yuri Tsivian (in 'Portraits', p. 70) has pointed out with regard to early Russian films that through the use of mirrors directors seized the opportunity to distinguish film from theatre. Intriguingly, Metz writes: 'Every mirror is like a camera (or a projector) because it "projects" the image a second time, because it offers it a second shot, because it has an *emissive* power.' Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation*, p. 63.

20. To be sure, Bazin introduced this distinction to describe the differences between paintings and films, with the former possessing centripetal and the latter centrifugal tendencies. André Bazin: 'Painting and Cinema', in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 164–9; pp. 165, 166.

21. Additionally, we sometimes encounter mirrors as a noticeable part of the image, but they don't give us a salient source of reflection. What makes a mirror shot complex is precisely the latter, not the mirror itself.

22. Chion, *Film*, pp. 481, 482.

23. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), especially chapter 7; Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992), especially chapter 2; Henry Bacon, 'The Extent of Mental Completion in Films', in *Projections. The Journal for Movies and Mind,* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2011), pp. 31–50.

24. Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973); Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973); Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1978); Julian Hanich and Hans Jürgen Wulff (eds), *Auslassen, Andeuten, Auffüllen: Der Film und die Imagination des Zuschauers* (Paderborn: Fink, 2012).

25. For examples of complex mirror shots in the silent era apart from the ones mentioned in Tsivian's article (Note 4), see the references to Urban Gad's *Weisse Rosen* (1916) or Af Klercker's *Mysteriet natten till den 25:e* (1917) in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 59 and 65. See also the brief discussion of *Robert Dinesen's Under Blinkfyrets Straaler* (1913) in www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2010/06/14/dreyer-re-reconsidered/ (accessed 4 November 2016).

26. See Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 69–71. Chion, *Film,* pp. 247–9 and pp. 491, 492.

27. Chion, *Film*, p. 491. For the important distinction between *source* and *emitter* of sound, see Chion, *Film*, pp. 247, 248.

28. David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light. On Cinematic Staging* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

29. See also Julian Hanich, 'Complex Staging. The Hidden Dimensions of Roy Andersson's Aesthetics', in *Movie. A Journal of Film Criticism*, No. 5 (2015), pp. 37–50.

30. Pascal Bonitzer: 'Partial Vision. Film and the Labyrinth', in *Wide Angle*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1981): 56–63, p. 59.

31. See also Tsivian, 'Portrait', p. 72 and Mitry, *Aesthetics,* pp. 198, 199.

32. Jean-Louis Comolli: 'Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field', in *Cinema against Spectacle. Technique and Ideology Revisited* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, [1971–72] 2015), p. 180.

33. André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', in *What Is Cinema?*, pp. 23–40; p. 34.

34. Similarly, Metz mentions a number of cases in which diegetic elements seem to mimic optical effects. When Sternberg or Ophüls film through semi-transparent curtains, this has a sensory effect similar to a blur. Or the doors and airlocks of the spaceship in Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) are like diegeticised irises or shutters. 'There is in sum a correspondence, both imperfect and precise, between certain optical effects and certain motifs or diegetic movements.' Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation*, p. 57.

35. Quoted in Bordwell et al., *Classical Hollywood*, p. 98.

36. Yet another type of disorientation based on the size of the mirror can be found in a by now famous scene in Yevgeni Bauer's last film *The King of Paris* (1917): Bauer wants us to believe that only *half* of the screen image is a mirror reflection, while in fact the mirror comprises the *entire* image and stretches beyond its edges into off-screen space. According to Tsivian, viewers get lost in Bauer's mirror

game when 'real' figures are taken for reflections, and reflected sets are perceived as real ones. Tsivian, 'Portrait', p. 77.

37. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *The Visible and the Invisible: On Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 157.