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Mirrors at the Threshold: From Mirror Stage to Macrocosm

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Abstract

Mirrors were crucial elements in defining the modern concept of the architectural interior in Europe during the seventeenth century. In the first section of this article we show how mirrors supported the development of Enlightenment theory of the psycho-social subject. This theme eventually reached its apex with Jacques Lacan's essay 'The Mirror Stage' and came to define the prevailing critical approach. The mirror in premodern Islam, however, is less concerned with the psycho-social subject and its interior architecture. In the second section, we consider how mirrors such as those employed in *ayeneh-kari* tiling are understood to situate cosmically and act poetically. Dissolving, fragmenting, and scattering effects tend to have greater importance than questions of self-image. Having established these contrasting critical positions, we then consider two more current permutations of the mirror: the advent of the mirror-glass façade in the twentieth century, and the use of mirrors in contemporary installation art. In the third and fourth sections, we explore the way mirrors can decentre the individual as a source of meaning and suggest or evoke new macrocosmic identities. Critical emphasis on the psychological subject's interior architecture falls short of recognising the many ways the physical design and construction of spaces might contribute to a wider range of spatial experiences and practices. In our concluding reflections, we suggest (without foreclosing other meanings or uses of the mirror as threshold) that practical and critical uses of the mirror have implications for spatial politics.

Keywords: interior design; mirror; subjectivity; Rococo; *ayeneh-kari*; glass; installation art

1. Introduction

In this article we consider the mirror as an architectural element that articulates spatial and rhetorical thresholds. Mirrors were crucial elements in defining the modern concept of the architectural interior in Europe during the seventeenth century. In doing so, they also supported the development of Enlightenment theory of the psycho-social subject; a theme that eventually reached its apex with Jacques Lacan's essay 'The Mirror Stage' and his subsequent writing on the "gaze" [1,2]. Notwithstanding Lacan's strong influence on interpretations of the architectural mirror, however, this article seeks to elaborate other spatial permutations of the mirror, the subject, and the world. In dialogue with Lacan's mirror, we place Islamic uses and imaginations of the mirror. Notably, while the former is understood as a defining threshold between interior and exterior, the Islamic mirror is better understood as articulating the threshold between microcosm and macrocosm.

To characterise the difference between these two perspectives, we attend to four significant moments in the career of the architectural mirror: the mirrored interiors of

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the Rococo, the practice of *ayeneh-kari* seen in premodern Iranian architecture, the advent of the mirror-glass façade in the twentieth century, and use of mirrors in contemporary installation art.

Given the vast range of ways that reflective surfaces have been used and interpreted spatially, this paper cannot be a comprehensive survey. We are not able to address the spatiality of mirrors as imaginative objects in literature and art: think of the Greek myth of Narcissus, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* (1434), or Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656). Our account begins with the development of large interior mirrors in the seventeenth century, but prior to this there were mirrors of polished metal and stone, and reflections in water, understood to act in various practical, rhetorical, scientific, and magical ways [3]. There is an extensive body of literature on glass and transparency in architecture, and mirrors played an important role in the development of perspective drawing in the Renaissance, two more themes on which we can only touch briefly here [4–6].

We focus on built works that make significant use of mirrors. How have mirrors been understood and used to articulate thresholds? Our methodology is broadly historical and hermeneutic, interpreting the mirror in terms of the meanings and experiences it has produced, and the shifting metaphors and imaginaries it has activated over time. If, as has been claimed, "to design is to interpret", we hope that interrogating the interchange between the mirror and its interpretations might open new avenues for creative practice [7] (p. 4). Our history of the architectural mirror is selective, attending to discontinuities, transitions, and disjunctions as more revealing than common uses or prevailing ideas. The four stops on our journey through the history of the architectural mirror have been chosen for their capacity to expand our practical and critical understanding of mirrors as threshold objects.

Certain aspects of the architectural mirror have been well-studied. We rely on Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's foundational study, *The Mirror: A History*, and themes of mirror, interior, and threshold come together in Georg Teyssot's 'A Topology of Thresholds' [8,9]. We extend these studies in two ways: by carrying them forward to consider further uses of the architectural mirror, and by suggesting an expansion of their fundamentally Lacanian theoretical stance. We will have succeeded in our aim if we are able to diversify discourses of mirroring in architecture and interior design, loosen the hold of a purely Lacanian-inspired theoretical understanding of the architectural mirror, and more generally recognise a wider rhetorical potential for the mirror as an architectural device. In Lacan's own thought, the mirror is only the earliest of a series of reformulations of space and visuality, moving through the idea of the gaze (briefly discussed below) and anamorphosis, and on into topologies and surfaces of "extimacy" that resist visual metaphors but involve reflection and recursion [10,11] (p. 668).

By the mid-eighteenth century, the interior had emerged in Europe as "an increasingly specialised realm [that offered. . .] a retreat from the world for the self, and a place in which subjectivity could flourish" [12] (p. 6). Uses, meanings, and experiences of the interior shift have continued to shift, particularly in response to new, mediatised imaginings of the self. Initially formulated as turning inward, away from the outside, the relationship with the exterior has become more complex, so that one recent author writes of an architecture that "ricochets reflections of the exterior on the interior, the interior on the exterior, the exterior-interior on the interior-exterior" [13] (p. 20). Interiors (and as we will see, particularly the mirrored interior) express a threshold condition: "the mirrored magic box is just one among the many metaphors of the modern entanglement with appearance and disappearance" [14] (p. 244). To see the roots of this condition, we turn first to Europe in the seventeenth

century, when mirrors abruptly moved from being relatively small, specialist objects to being pervasive interior surface treatments.

2. Mirror Rooms and the Mirror-Stage

The mirror cabinet or mirrored room was a staple interior of the late baroque and Rococo in continental Europe [15]. Venetian mirror-makers developed new techniques for making large panes of silvered glass, and these methods were eagerly replicated elsewhere, particularly at the royal Saint-Gobain glassworks in France [3] (pp. 35–57). The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, designed by Charles Le Brun and Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1678–1684), had over 350 mirrors along one wall, arranged to face arched windows along the other (Figure 1). It was conceived as a demonstration of the technical prowess of French glassmakers and became the pivotal space of the French monarchy, defining the court as a play of seeing and being seen; of shimmering and glittering light, of the world remade as a resplendent setting for the king [15,16]. Across Europe, mirror rooms proliferated amongst the wealthy.



Figure 1. Charles Le Brun and Jules Hardouin-Mansart, Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, (1678–84). Photo: Myrabella/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0.

On the grounds of the Nymphenburgh Palace in Munich, François de Cuvilliés designed the Amalienburg hunting lodge for Charles VII, Elector of Bavaria, centred on an elaborate mirror room [17]. Hunting had become a highly formalised social entertainment involving elaborate parties. Amalienburg's architecture and ornamental scheme makes reference to tents, dogs, stags, horns, and wild growth. The room is circular, and the piers between the windows are mirrored with square panes of bevel-edged glass. As at Versailles, the mirror room provides an opulent setting filled with reflections, scattering light, multiplying views of its occupants.

Mirror rooms could also be more private affairs: Sybilla Augusta's cabinet in Rastatt Favorite Palace in Baden-Württemburg (1725) set panes of glass in angled arrangements that appear like the interior of a gem [18]. Mirrors were positioned high and low to catch fragmentary views and amplify the sense that the ornamental frames are windows into another space. The effect is to visually thin the wall surface, reducing its mass. Mirror-backed cabinets were used to display ceramics, permitting the back of the three-dimensional vessel to be seen as well as the front without needing to touch or turn it. The glazed surface of the porcelain resonates with the glass of the mirror. In a similar mirror cabinet at the Würzburg residence in Bavaria (1740–1745), the walls are entirely panelled with glass; some mirrored, some back-painted [19]. The visual field of the mirror continues seamlessly past its frames, so that they become a thin sculptural lattice. The interior reads less a room with surface decoration than a continuous environment. The mirror also creates

ambiguity between surface and depth, confounding orientation: one's own body can be seen facing different directions; light is cast around so that its source is difficult to determine. These smaller mirror rooms allowed individuals to see themselves in a spatial setting that dissolved outwards rather than closing in.

The "decorated interior", writes art historian Meredith Martin, became "the paradigmatic art form" of the Rococo, and the mirror room was its exemplary type [16] (p. 189). As a conceptual and artistic unity concerned with continuity of surface, visual effects, and integrated ornament, the interior found its apotheosis in the mirror room: capturing the world in the surface, multiplying detail, and incorporating human bodies themselves into an artistic microcosm. There was more at stake in the prevalence of mirrors than a new decorative style, however:

> From a glance in the mirror flowed not only a taste for ornament and an attention to social display and hierarchy, but also a new geography of the body, which made visible previously unfamiliar images (one's back and profile) and stirred up sensations of modesty and self-consciousness. [3] (p. 1)

Mirrors promoted self-visibility at the same time that Enlightenment thought in Europe was reinforcing the theme of the self-aware individual. Whether narcissistic or a matter of Socratic self-knowledge, the self was reimagined through the mirror: as a "theatrical stage", a "place of transfer", or a "site to shape one's presence" [3] (pp. 174, 182, 153). As Baroque philosopher Balthazar Gracian put it, "he who cannot see himself might as well not exist" [3] (p. 146).

The formal convulsions of the Baroque were closely associated with new concepts of vision and space. Christine Buci-Glucksmann points to the proliferation of distorted, anamorphic vision; a "doubled and divided gaze" that leads to a kind of madness [20] (p. 28). This madness was often linked to an excess of light or darkness: effects of glare, glamour, magnificence, and deep shadow. Light could threaten the subject with its "fatal dioptrics" [20] (p. 33). When sight was overwhelmed, it triggered experiences of wonder, marvel, and the extraordinary.

> Vision is an operation, an act that generates a multiplicity of perspectives, the division of the visible, the invention of an aesthetic within a rhetoric that will stage it and control its effects in order to better convince and seduce. This rhetoric, which is simultaneously glorious and dark, assumes a form that is alternately empty or excessive, yet promises infinite variation. [20] (p. 22)

The Rococo inherited aspects of Baroque understanding, but tended to tame and diffuse them with a sense of propriety. If the Baroque mirror distorted, that of the Rococo tended to diffuse. Preoccupations with architectural mass receded, yielding "a surface ornament confined strictly within the geometric outline of the panels" [21] (p. 223). The strong affects of the Baroque folded into the surface, but as mirrors grew, multiplied, and were used in new ways, the complexities of the mirrored subject expanded.

The proposition that a physical encounter with the mirror could play a fundamental role in the formation of the self was given a new explicit formulation in the twentieth century by Jacques Lacan. His essay, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function' argued we develop a sense of our own selfhood through the mirror (or other things functioning as mirrors) [1]. When the child discovers their reflection, they form a concept of themselves as an individual, "a unified, pulled-together whole, an integrated, coordinated totality" distinct from the world around them [22]. The child identifies with their reflection, projects themself into the mirror-figure in a "jubilant assumption of his specular image" [1] (p. 95). The implication, according to Lacan, is that we do not experience ourselves purely as an autonomous subject, but in terms of ourselves as an imaginary object: "the specular

image seems to be the threshold of the visible world" [1] (p. 96). From this psychoanalytic perspective, space is first experienced as the direct counterpart to the imagined body, a "complement of the kind of subject who occupies it" [23] (p. 99). The relationship between the self and the world is mapped onto a distinction between interior and exterior. Crucially, though, this centres on a "*misrecognition*"; Jacqueline Rose points to the importance of these little scenes for Lacan and Freud as being "moments in which perception *founders*. . . or in which the pleasure in looking tips over into the register of *excess* [. . .as] a problem of seeing" [24] (p. 227). From a Lacanian perspective, uncertainties and complexities of vision and our investment in it are fundamental to psychic formation, architecture, geography, and cosmology. It is hard to find contemporary writing on the architectural mirror that does not refer to Lacan, and he is frequently cited in accounts of the emergence of the modern interior. Charles Rice, for example, cites Lacan as he writes of "the interior's role as part of a technology of subjectification" [25] (p. 38). Anthony Vidler argues that various modern anxieties related to the interior can be understood in Lacanian terms [26] (p. 77). The reflected gaze also plays an important part in Beatriz Colomina's account of the modern interior. She describes the mirror that Sigmund Freud hung in the window of his Berggasse office:

> The placement of Freud's mirror on the boundary between interior and exterior undermines the status of the boundary as a fixed limit. Inside and outside cannot simply be separated. [27] (p. 255)

That the interior is a psychological space constituted by a play of projection that forms an imaginary geography has become a staple of contemporary interior theory. In her recent theoretical maps of the field, Inge Somers locates as crucial the idea of the interior as "the representation of an individual's identity, the space of subjectivity, the 'mirror of the self'" [28] (p. 19, quoting Clare Marcus). Although they are centuries apart, we might see the Rococo mirrored interior and the Lacanian mirror-stage as bookends (or at least convenient landmarks) for the story of modern psycho-social subjectivity in European cultures. The mirror, in its new spatial uses, instigated new experiences of the self and new sites for its construction and performance. This is cultural context and underlying spatial and material imaginary on which Lacan built his account of the mirror-stage. The mirror is not just one interior element among many, but a crucial element for understanding how the interior comes to be theorised and imagined in terms of its thresholds. In what follows, we will refer to the Rococo–Lacanian mirror to indicate this lineage of spatial practice and theory.

3. The Divine Cosmic Mirror

We might usefully expand our understanding of the mirror, however, by attending to how mirrors are spatialised and imagined outside of the European Rococo–Lacanian trajectory. The uses of mirrors in Islamic architecture, for example, and their cosmological, poetic, philosophical, and scientific implications have commonalities and links with the European model, but also crucial differences. As we will see, the mirror in premodern Islam is less concerned with the psycho-social subject and questions of self-image. Instead, mirrors and their repeating patterns connect time and space by dissolving the threshold between the physical (visible) and the metaphysical (invisible) world. Ultimately, the spiritual world is reflected in the sensible world, and the ego is substituted for unity and plurality [29] (p. 76).

In Europe, the mirror is an interface between the notion of the spatial interior (as it emerged in the seventeenth century) and the philosophical model of subjectivity as interiority. The interior of the self (or the self as a kind of interior) is hosted by and reflected in spatial interiors, especially domestic ones. In the premodern Islamic world, however,

mirrors are more rarely used pictorially, but are employed to generate effects of shimmering, fluidity, and dissolution. In the seventeenth century Persian artisans took up Venetian techniques, importing mirror and mirror-makers from Venice. Mirror-work—*ayeneh-kari*—which had been practiced since the sixteenth century, flourished in a series of spectacular buildings [30,31] (p. 692). Previous mirror-work at the Shrine of Shah-e-Cheragh in Shiraz, a mosque and funerary monument for Imam Musa al-Kazim's two sons, was expanded, rendering the interior a crystalline spectacle (Figure 2) [32]. Golestan Palace in Tehran, built in the sixteenth century, has a number of halls and rooms completely lined with *ayeneh-kari* (Figure 3) [33,34]. Around the same time, the Shrine of Fatimeh Masumeh in Qom was given not only a dramatically mirrored central space but intricately mirrored entrance archways. The Chehel Sotoun garden in Isfahan, which included some of the first known instances of *ayeneh-kari*, was given a pavilion in the seventeenth century with archways of *muqarnas* (stalactite vaulting) covered in *ayeneh-kari* representing the repetition and unity of the cosmos (Figure 4) [35] (p. 112).

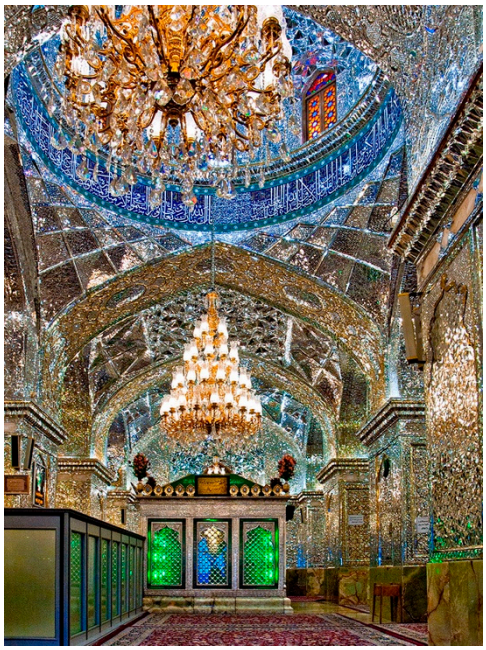


Figure 2. Shrine of Shah-e-Cheragh in Shiraz. Photo: Reza Sobhani/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 3. Mirrored interior of Golestan Palace. Photo: Diego Delso/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 4. Vaulting with *ayeneh-kari* at Chehel Sotoun. Photo: Amirashaei/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.

Ayeneh-kari uses small pieces of cut mirror glass embedded in a thin layer of plaster. Where European mirrored interiors tended to prioritise larger panes, *ayeneh-kari* is characterised by a mosaic of small, repeated fragments, with travellers reporting surfaces as "looking-glasses that illuminated the ceiling and the curving upper surfaces with reflected light" [30] (p. 693). Some have speculated that the method arose from the desire to use imported Venetian mirrors that arrived broken [31] (p. 9). The artisan traces out a drawing of geometric patterns on the substrate, then coats it thinly with a plaster bedding compound. Small pieces, some scored, are positioned and then lightly struck to split them in place. They are gently manipulated into the plaster bed and angled to create a shifting pattern of reflection across the surface.

According to Reza Daftarian, *ayeneh-kari* is a specifically architectural technique, distinct from the use of mirrored surfaces on objects. Some uses of *ayeneh-kari* resemble European uses of mirrors, theatrically ornamenting wealth and power, but the fragmentation of the mirror distinguishes them. In shrines, however, the mirrors are used to different effect. From the perspective of Islamic mystics like twelfth- to thirteenth-century Sufi philosopher Ibn al-'Arabī, the universe and its worlds mirror God. Premodern Islamic architecture uses *ayeneh-kari* to create a fragmentary unity expressing the geometry and sparkling-shimmering splendor of the cosmos. The Shah-e-Cheragh and Golestan Palace combine reflective materials such as glass, gold, silver, and steel to mirror this mystical conception of the cosmos [36]. The macrocosm, understood to consist of the present world, the in-between world, and the afterworld, meet in the mirror.

Islamic scholar Sayeed Hossein Nasr argues that the mathematical qualities found in such architecture are not borrowed from outside traditions or Western influences, but emerge from the Qur'an, whose complex patterns reflect a deep connection between intellect, spiritual understanding, and mathematics [37]. Light is crucial for understanding Islamic spiritual experience. In the school of philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawadī, light overcomes with unrelenting brightness that illuminates truth. Light represents divine presence, and colours come to symbolise levels of cosmic existence: "If white symbolizes the unity of undifferentiated reality, colours which result from the polarization of light

symbolize the manifestation of the One in the many" [37] (p. 54). By candlelight or changing daylight, or in relation to moving human bodies, *ayeneh-kari* mirrors shimmer, so that the solid substance of the wall dissolves. As one contemporary practitioner writes, "when you look at those mirrors, you see yourself as small and shattered. . . you see yourself broken in front of that grandeur" [38]. Breaking with selfishness or vanity, the fractured mirror humbles and reminds the viewer of the beauty and glory of the space they are privileged to exist in. Ibn al-'Arabī suggested that the ultimate unification is when one thing disappears into another. This paradox of coming-to-be as ceasing-to-be is

> like looking in a mirror and seeing your image: the reflected image is neither yourself, since you are standing apart from the mirror, nor other than yourself, since it is your own and not anyone else's. If you imagine that you are able to look in a number of mirrors simultaneously and see your reflected images in all of them at once, then the paradox of unity and multiplicity is partially resolved. [39] (pp. 67–68)

The surface, like the vanishing point in European Renaissance perspective, is a limit that disappears.

> Look at the form manifest to the eye in a polished surface and verify your vision. You will find that the form has come between you and your perception of the polished surface, which is the locus of disclosure. So you will never see the surface. [40,41] (p. 89; pp. 98–99)

Ibn al-Haytham's famous treatise on optics (critical to the development of science in Renaissance Europe) spends four of its seven volumes on the reflected image and the various ways it can distort, deceive, or create illusion [42]. In his study of the mathematics of spherical mirrors, he countered the long-held Ptolemaic idea that the eye radiated visual rays in order to see. Instead, he insisted that the eye was a receiver of light rays originating outside itself.

In Islam, God is believed to be the Absolute Light; consequently, the intricate patterning, geometry and reflected light of *ayeneh-kari* create an interior environment that facilitates *dhikr* (remembrance of God) [39] (p. 197). If we take the position that information is revealed by light, then we perceive space through its intensity. These are only some of the various perspectives on reflection and illumination in Islamic philosophy and architecture, and we have not examined here the flow of Islamic scholarship like Ibn al-Haytham's into Europe during the Renaissance [43]. Consistently though, and in contrast to the Rococo–Lacanian emphasis on reflections as the beginning of interiority, the microcosm reflects the divine beauty of the infinite macrocosm.

4. Inverting the Mirror-Box

How might this expanded idea of the architectural mirror—seeing it as articulating the threshold microcosm and macrocosm rather than the psychological threshold of interior and exterior—shed new light on more contemporary uses and experiences? We could turn to a significant shift that occurs in the twentieth century: the mirror goes outside. While Islamic mirrors had often featured in the decorative schemes of threshold spaces like doorways and entrance arches, European mirrors had largely been a feature of the interior until the mid-twentieth century when the mirror-glass façade appeared. When the mirror no longer addresses the individual but faces outwards to the wider world, the Lacanian emphasis on psychological individuation no longer seems so decisive, and themes we might recognise from Islamic uses of the mirror come to the fore.

Eero Saarinen's office for Bell Labs (1957–1962) is generally credited with being the first major use of exterior mirror-glass [44,45] (p. 209). It also helped define the American

typology of the peri-urban corporate campus. The building is a single rectilinear form set in wooded parklands, surrounded with extensive areas of parking, artificial lakes, and grassed lawns. The building's 19,000 m^2 glazed curtain wall used laminated glass treated to produce a mirrored outward-facing surface (Figure 5). The mirror-glass façade employs the logic of the curtain wall; that the exterior surface of the building is a plane hanging in space rather than a vertically stacked mass. The cladding wraps around a series of smaller blocks and large atria. From within, Saarinen imagined, "[t]he individual, emerging from concentration in laboratory or office, will come upon magnificent, uninterrupted views of the surrounding countryside" [46] (p. 25). Although the interior circulation was intended to create social contact between the building's users, one complained that it failed in this regard, directing attention away from others: "All you could do was go and lean against the railing and look out the window" [46] (p. 27). Inverted, the mirror box conceals its interior, directs attention outwards and echoes its setting.



Figure 5. Bell Labs Holmdel, now Bell Works, Holmdel, New Jersey, USA. Photo: Acroterion/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Bell Labs parklands are mainly a visual landscape and spatial buffer, creating a setting for the building to be viewed against (Figure 6). They are not primarily for inhabitation or use, but for openness, emptiness and a sense of distance. The campus has been read explicitly as a new kind of Versailles: a corporate palace with lakes, fountains, and forest; but the hall of mirrors now faces outward, "resisting closer scrutiny and suggesting, if only symbolically, that everything worth knowing was already inside" [46] (p. 28). The mirror now functions to suppress the individual and their human setting; creating a more lonely relationship with an open, empty, and synthetic landscape.



Figure 6. The Bell Labs building in Holmdel. Photo: Lee Beaumont/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 2.0.

Where the Rococo interior multiplied the individual and their social setting, the mirrored exterior voids the interior and casts the exterior back on itself. The exteriorised, super-scaled mirror does not address individual subjects or social worlds. The Bell Labs mirror does not hold the gaze, but directs it away; it does not centre the individual, but overwhelms it with context. It creates a visual field rather than focusing on an image, and so is more like *ayeneh-kari.* The eye is not intended to rest anywhere but to continue slipping away, evoking thoughts of a wider world. Where *ayeneh-kari* is intended to direct attention to a divinely oriented macrocosm, however, Bell Labs foregrounds a corporate macrocosm centred on an abstract scientific view (that could be set in service of business).

The mirrored facade went on to become a crucial signifier of corporate modernity in the latter half of the century. Mirrored glass towers appeared as inscrutable crystalline monuments in the city. In Modern architecture, transparency served as an emblem of clarity and rationality. It was believed to support democratic social ideals, and revealed the continuity of interior and exterior space. But glass is a tricky material; transparency "quickly turns into obscurity (its apparent opposite) and reflectivity (its reversal)" [26] (p. 220). The corporate mirror-glass wall also became associated with the anxieties of contemporary life. In their video work *Overexposed* (1995), architects Diller and Scofidio panned a camera slowly across the curtain-wall façade of a New York office building [47]. The building exemplifies the modernist ideal of glass as a material of openness, lightness, and transparency, but Diller and Scofidio's camera used this transparency to surveil the apparently unwitting inhabitants. When the inside is lit and the outside is dark, transparency reverses, exposing the life of the interior. Diller and Scofidio revealed the latent voyeurism embedded in modern transparency. Mirror-glass facilitates looking in and looking out at different times, collapsing boundaries between observers and observed. The window had always been an emotionally and socially charged site. The inhabitant of the modern glass building now also worries about being watched through the window. The mirrored glass façade can be read in psychological terms, but in *Overexposed* it can also be seen to reveal the threshold between the individualised microcosm of late-twentieth-century workers and the cellular macrocosm they occupy. The sliding camera acts as a "view from nowhere" extrapolating a somewhat bleak "world, conceived from nowhere within it" [48] (p. 73).

This macrocosmic effect of the mirrored exterior is exploited in a different way by Studio Libeskind in their National Holocaust Memorial of Names in Amsterdam (2021; Figure 7) [49]. The memorial is organised around a horizontal datum. Below, an arrangement of brick walls are inscribed with the names of the dead. Above float angular mirror-clad forms, articulated as if they are solid chromed masses. The forms are abstracted Hebrew letter-forms invoking the phrase 'in memory'. There is nowhere for the viewer to see this, though. The writing is inscribed from an oblique view, not with reference to any specific viewpoint a human could occupy. It does not seem to address a physical viewer; the writing is not scaled or oriented for a human eye. Rather it posits a cosmic vision, an "anti-perspectival" view from elsewhere, or the eye of God [50] (p. 17).

The memorial sets its viewers in motion; as they move between the walls, searching perhaps for a particular name, the visual field overhead fractures and shifts. Like the surfaces of *ayeneh-kari* the visitor is refracted across the surface of something they cannot quite grasp. By virtue of the mirrored surfaces, the letters form part of an environmental field, so that the word seems to be articulated as a folding of the context. The word is inscribed into the space of the environment. For his Jewish Museum in Berlin (1999), Libeskind employed a similar oblique strategy. The graphic figure of the Star of David stretched across the plan cuts interior volumes that are expressed spatially as darkened voids. If these voids express hollowness and loss, the mirrored forms of the Amsterdam memorial speak of something latent and persistent, folded into the present city. One never

quite enters into its interior: there is the sense of inaccessible spaces, or spaces that slip away and spill back into the city. The mirror produces an interplay between here and elsewhere.



Figure 7. Studio Libeskind, National Holocaust Memorial of Names. Photo: Christian Michelides/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.

While the mirror-lined box lends itself easily to individualistic psychological readings, the mirror-clad box is more complex. By producing or manipulating the environment as a visual field it tends rather to decentre the individual viewer. The Rococo–Lacanian mirror tends to frame figure–ground relationships; Lacan imagines that the individual appears in relief against the world, which becomes a backdrop. Islamic philosophers like Ibn al-'Arabī and Ibn al-Haytham also see the mirror as relating the one and the many, but understand this through the dissolving and scattering of the image. For al-'Arabī, the many-faceted individual is part of a shimmering play of mirrors that return the divine image. Al-Haytham decentred the individual by demonstrating that vision did not radiate from the eye but reflected in all directions at once. There are of course drastic differences between the cultural understanding underpinning these philosophies and the architectural examples of this section. Inverted mirror-boxes, however, can be understood as articulating thresholds between microcosm and macrocosm. Shifting reflections apprehended in localised miniature invoke and call out to a macrocosmic elsewhere that is not otherwise directly accessible.

5. The Dislocating Mirror

Another nexus of mirror-use can be found in the experimental spatial practice of installation art. Installation emerged in the 1970s alongside performance art as one of the most significant new artistic modes of the twentieth century, joining an architectural conception of spatial experience with sculptural and curatorial practices. Our fourth and final stop in tracing the career of the architectural mirror takes in several instances of mirrors in installation art. Installation, as art theorist Claire Bishop describes, produces an experiential field that relies on a mobile, active viewer for its completion [51,52] (p. 6, pp. 103–104).

In this emphasis on the live, performative and subjective, installation art continues themes that had already emerged in interior design (and architecture more broadly). It also opened a significant channel for spatial experimentation so that many contemporary

interior designers use installation as a key method of practice. Installation can "activate. . . experimentation and testing of boundaries while retaining. . . lightness and provisionality" [52] (p. 129). Summarising the state of interior theory, Inge Somers defines the interior as "a temporal relationship. . . a materialised process of interiorisation" [28] (p. 23). These temporal terms foreground interior space as the unfolding of an immersive environment. Early installation work in the 1970s picked up on the logic of the immersive interior (something like the underlying logic of the Rococo interior), and the genre came to explicitly play with the viewer's subjectivity, manipulate the work's closure, and converse with a specific spatial context. In this section, we discuss several instances in which the mirror is a key mediator of this play.

Rirkrit Tiravanija uses mirrors and explicit architectural references as part of his interest in constructing spaces that parallel everyday ones. In *untitled 2002 (he promised)*, Tirivanija partially reconstructed Rudolf Schindler's Schindler Chace House (1922) using chromed steel [53,54]. In the mirrored house Tirivanija hosted a series of convivial activities and performances including film showings, music, Thai massage, a barbecue, and workshops for children. According to Tiravanija, Schindler's house was an ideal, a social and architectural experiment attempting a different world. The uniformly reflective surfaces of the reconstructed house disregard the concrete and timber of Schindler's house, emphasising this model-like quality. They are like play equipment, mockups, or sets. In this sense, the mirrored surfaces detach the architecture from context, or dissolve architecture into it. Tiravanija's architectural reconstructions of modernist works act as a foil to life and human activity. "I use architecture to intervene into it. Because I think it's kind of like a disillusionment with the West, to put life back into Modernism" [55]. While it framed the activities it hosted, it also multiplied and fragmented them, turning them into an ambient atmospheric condition; the hubbub of games, food, music, conversation became their own context. Like Versaille's Hall of Mirrors, Tiravanija's mirror-house centres the social world. The chrome and stainless-steel surfaces of the reconstructed Schindler Chace house are not positioned to frame this activity, but to let its life play across the surface in glimpses and partial views. The installation offers a social microcosm that connects with environments, activities, lives, and relationships outside the gallery.

If Tiravanija's world is warmly convivial, Anish Kapoor's are cool and remote. Kapoor has often worked with mirrors. His *Random Mirror Triangle* (2018) resembles the *ayeneh-kari* of Shah-e-Cheragh and Golestan Palace. His *Sky Mirror* (2001) is a canted concave mirror mounted in a park to captures a circle of the sky within the landscape field. *Cloud Gate* (2004) in Chicago is perhaps one of his most recognisable works (Figure 8) [56] (p. 120–133). The mirrored form returns a twisted view of the city skyline. The highly polished surface, lack of pedestal or other visible footing, and apparent seamlessness make *Cloud Gate* seem abstract and inhuman; as if it intersects the human world or has only temporarily landed there. Its scale often seems to diminish or push the viewer aside, suggesting much larger hands or eyes. The form contains an arched interior that multiplies and scatters reflections. The viewer slides across the surface rather than being focalized. The mirror twists, pulls, and inflates the world around the viewer, consuming and cloaking themselves in sites.

Kapoor's mirrors extend his interest in voids: hollows, inversions, black holes, and negative spaces. These voids are not often inhabitable interior volumes, but are apprehended from the exterior as an opening into darkness. Blacked-out voids like those in *Descent into Limbo* (1992) and *Building for a Void* (1992) conceal their depth, appearing as black circles. In *Turning the World Inside Out* (1995), the void in the floor has a mirrored surface and takes a sucking form as it descends into darkness. The surrounding room and the reflected bodies of the viewers become visually liquid, as if being poured into the dark or sucked down a drain. Kapoor says "The void has many presences. Its presence as fear

is toward the loss of self, from a nonobject to a nonself. . . I have always been drawn to a notion of fear, towards a sensation of vertigo, of falling, of being pulled inwards" [57] (p. xxxv).



Figure 8. Anish Kapoor, Cloud Gate, Chicago. Photo: Aveedibya Dey/Unsplash.

Loss of self is an important theme of psychology. As Rose points out, the Lacanian mirror stage, which appears to be about the integration of the individual subject, also incorporates its dissolution [24] (p. 227). Uncertainties and complexities of vision and our investment in it are taken as fundamental to psychic formation. Perhaps Kapoor's mirrors align with a different Lacanian trope: the gaze as something in which we are caught rather than an intentional act. For Lacan, "the world of inanimate objects to some extent always looks back on the perceiver" [2,58] (p. 91). Like a child who comes to identify with the image in the mirror and begins to live as this character, our selfhood forms in relation to a view from somewhere else. On this point the Lacanian mirror and the Islamic one reflect each another: when the mirror scatters rather than focuses, it implies a larger and more complex context that does not centre the individual. Kapoor's voids and mirrored spaces seem to occupy the centre and exert their own presence, while the viewer slips in and out of focus and position. The mirror no longer centres or positions, but dissolves and casts out. Kapoor's objects seem to imply scales and registers of experience inaccessible to the viewer.

The experience of losing oneself is even more explicitly thematized in the work of Yayoi Kusama. Kusama has produced many mirror rooms that exploit the magic of discovering a space apparently larger on the inside than it appears from the outside. In her *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* of 1965, Kusama multiplies the phallus into a horizontal field and uses mirrors to visually extend this field, comically deflating masculine individualism [59] (p. 578). These spaces have a "delirious", "dispersive" quality [60] (pp. 25, 186). In *Narcissus Garden* (1966), a field of mirrored spheres multiplied and concentrated the world into portable jewel-like bubbles; Kusama offered them for sale. In many of her mirror

room works, such as *The Spirits of the Pumpkins Descended into the Heavens* (2017, Figure 9), the viewer peers from the outside into a volume in which a few items are multiplied to become an infinitely repeating landscape. Effects of light and reflection are sometimes layered: in *Passing Winter* (2005), small circular mirrors are suspended in the mirror box; and in *Infinity Mirror Room—Filled with the Brilliance of Life* (2011), the box is darkened and filled with illuminated spheres. Kusama's statements about her schizophrenia make clear what is at stake in the infinite field. She has described having hallucinatory experiences of "self-obliteration" in which the world dissolves into points of colour [60] (p. 27). Her mirror rooms, seen from the outside through small apertures, dislocate viewers from their bodies, amplify space and reduce it to repetitions of the same, like an atomist's fever-dream. In practical terms, her installations are boxes with an interior and exterior. They are experienced, however, as visual fields.

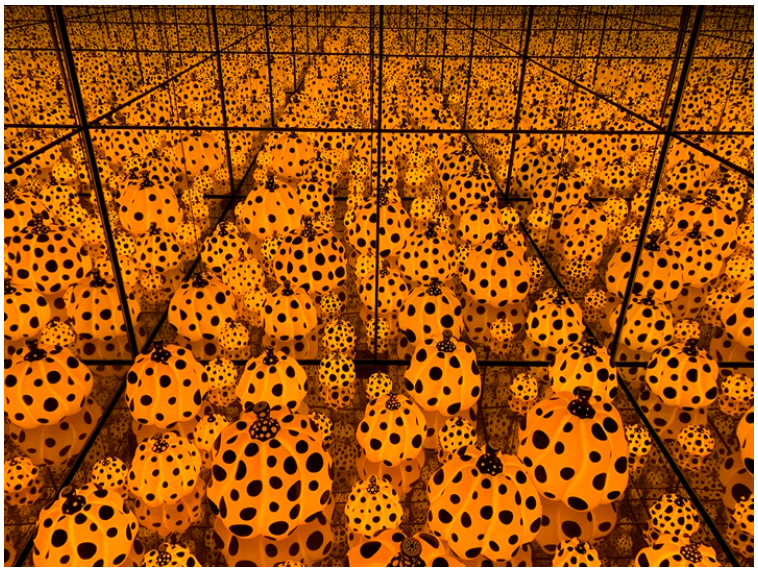


Figure 9. Yayoi Kusama, The Spirits of the Pumpkins Descended into the Heavens (2015). Photo: Ncysea/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.

There are, of course, many other installation artists who have worked with mirrors. Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, for example, explicitly adapted the techniques of *ayeneh-kari* in conversation with modern practices of abstraction and installation she encountered in America [61]. Installation art addresses the situation and subjectivity of the viewer, and the mirrored surface recurs as an element of installation because of the ways it can incorporate viewer and context into the work, and manipulate the work's sense of boundedness. Mirrors can instigate relationships that decentre the individual as a source of meaning and suggest or evoke new macrocosmic identities. Tiravanija points us towards a grounded utopia of conviviality. Architectural modernism is presented as a failed ideal, but one that can be reanimated by making it reflect a social world. Where modern architecture tended to think of human activity in terms of programme, function, and specific activities, Tiravanija delights in the heterogeneity and informality of a social human world. Kapoor's macrocosm is cryptic or alien; his mirrors hint at a world scaled differently to the viewer, a dark space into which we might easily slip, or a world formed by gravity and forces independent of human hands. And Kusama, although she writes of her work as obliterating self, might also be understood as merging herself with the cosmos, dissipating individual perspective by providing glimpses of a multiplicitous, unbounded, repeating cosmos.

6. Reflections

The mirror, writes philosopher Anna Mudde, is "a grounding object in our metaphors of knowing and philosophical practice" [62] (p. 541). Mirroring, reflection, and interiority have been fundamental to self-conception and the formation of modern structures of subjectivity, and link them to physical spaces. The mirrored interior, as Kaiyi Lin writes, is "conditioned by this modern understanding of the interior as an experience of thresholds", giving meaning to the play of visibility [14] (p. 244). To discuss architectural uses of the mirror is to expose aspects of a shared spatial imaginary: metaphors, themes, language, and habits that articulate a field of possible thoughts and experiences. The seventeenth century is a crucial nexus for this imaginary. Dramatic improvements in the manufacture of glass mirrors corresponded with new attention to the interior as a designed environment and a philosophical model of the individual subject as negotiating the threshold between a personal interior and an exterior world. These three things—a material technology, an architectural concept, and a psychological model—form what we have termed the Rococo–Lacanian view. Lacan's twentieth-century description of the mirror-stage and the reflected image as "the threshold of the visible world" culminate this line of thought, cementing a psychological interpretation of the architectural mirror [1] (p. 77). The frequency with which Lacan's mirror stage is cited in works concerning the architectural mirror attests to the pervasiveness of this interpretation. The dominance of the Lacanian view in interpretations of the mirror points to the value of this as an interpretative strategy, but also potentially obscures the ways mirrors were interpreted and experienced previously. It is our hope that by looking more widely for accounts of the mirror we might discover new critical and conceptual resources for theorising and practicing architecture, and thus broaden our sense of how thresholds between the self and the world are formed architecturally.

In order to counter what we see as a Eurocentric bias in the Rococo–Lacanian view, we specifically compare it with how mirror, interiority, threshold, and self-experience appear in premodern Islam. We do not intend to create a binary opposition between West and East, between the mirrors of European Enlightenment subjectivity and those of Islamic cosmology, or between the mirror-rooms of the Rococo and *ayeneh-kari*. As a crude summary, however, we understand the Rococo–Lacanian mirror to function psycho-socially around the distinction between interior and exterior, while the Islamic mirror functions cosmically and poetically around the distinction between microcosm and macrocosm. The former tends to frame images; the latter tends to constructs visual fields. The former catalyses self-understanding, supplying a self-image and a sense of world as other-than-self; the latter disperses the vicissitudes of perception, revealing the shimmering presence of other planes of reality.

Diffusion, fragmentation and scattering are crucial aspects of both *ayeneh-kari* and the Rococo–Lacanian mirror. In both traditions, the mirror can multiply, misdirect and confound perception. The framed image is at risk of dissolving into a visual field. Such moments in the Lacanian view can threaten the hold an individual subject has on their own sense of self, and diminish their sense of being discrete from the world. In premodern Islam, however, this effect is often interpreted as becoming taken up into a greater cosmic order. The Rococo–Lacanian view and that of premodern Islam agree that this dissolving of limits and collapsing of thresholds is an important spatialising experience. In our examples of new developments in mirror-spaces in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, we have attended to how they complicate the threshold between interior and exterior, and imply or construct worlds. In our reading, the inversion of the mirror-box brought about by mirror glass facades has a diffusive and dislocating effect. While one version of this view from elsewhere might serve corporate world-making (as in the case of Saarinen's Bell Labs), it has also been used to imply loss, witness, and collective memory (as in the case

of Libeskind's National Holocaust Memorial of Names). The advent of installation as a genre of art from the 1970s on also gave rise to new articulations of the architectural mirror. In the works we discuss, the mirror diffuses the individual perceiving subject rather than focalising it. As we see it, these works are organised more around the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm than through a logic of interiority. Whether the macrocosm is understood as a social fabric, a superscaled reality, or a multiplicitous universe, the mirror is threshold device through which the viewer can encounter it. Each of these works implies a world, and positions itself as taking place at its threshold. The architecturally scaled mirror is a crucial device in producing this effect. While purely psychological readings of the architectural mirror can offer some insight, we can expand these by drawing on a wider cultural range of interpretations.

The opposition between interior and exterior organizes not just our buildings, but our spatial politics at all scales. Discourses about strangers and intercultural encounters, individualistic ethics, and the resurgence of nationalist politics all call into play metaphors of containment and architectures of separation. Architecture's physical materiality—its interiors, exteriors, sites, thresholds, surfaces, and uses—shape and are shaped by these rhetorical uses. To explore architectural imaginaries like that of the mirror is both a means to further architectural practice and to discover how architecture pervades us. Reflecting on the relationship between architecture and thought, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz asks,

> Can architecture inhabit us as much as we see ourselves inhabiting it? Does architecture have to be seen in terms of subjectivization and semiotization, in terms of use and meaning? Can architecture be thought, no longer as a whole, a complex unity, but as a set of and site for becomings of all kinds? [23] (p. 145)

This is the potential we look towards with this article. Grosz, following Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, situates thought as a matter of the in-between. At the threshold between states, "thought, force, and change invest and invent new series, metamorphosing new bodies from the old through their encounter" [23] (p. 145). Thresholds do not mark essential binaries (inside/outside, self/other), but crucial productive moments of articulation, in the recursive sense given by political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" [63] (p. 91). The four permutations of the architecture mirror that we have mapped provide a framework for understanding the mirror as an articulating threshold, both in the material and metaphorical sense.

In practical terms, the architectural mirror places the viewer in view, articulating them as simultaneously continuous with and separate from their architectural context. The mirror offers critical opportunities for designers and architects to rearticulate macrocosmic relationships: societies, ecologies, regions, cities, and spiritual contexts can be invoked. In historical and methodological terms, this is why the mirror should be seen more broadly than the Lacanian lens implies. Critical emphasis on the psychological subject's interior architecture falls short of recognising the many ways the physical design and construction of spaces might articulate a wider range of becomings: individual and collective, enduring and fleeting, human and nonhuman, focalizing and diffusive.

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