

For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul.

Oscar Wilde, *The picture of Dorian Grey*.

I look on in horror at my decapitated head. Its slack-jawed silence disturbs me. This is not how I want to be, not what I want to see, my head staring mutely from the rafters like some medieval criminal made an example of by angry villagers.

The camera is a knife, Walter Benjamin tells us, the photographer a surgeon...

Perhaps this is not my head but rather my face that has slipped free from my body. Flaked, scaled, scalped - all prickly surface - my image has slid from my body, stuck itself back together around some gross misshapen orb: a hollowed out, puffed up balloon of my self. I am reminded of Tony Oursler's video faces that project onto any dumb surface to animate them grotesquely (the intuitive fear that the puppet, the ventriloquist's doll, bring up for some of us). 'A horror story. The face is a horror story,' exclaim Deleuze and Guattari with a shudder. Their deadly 'face' colonizes the head, decorporealises it, disconnects it from the world, from others, from the body - connects it more sinisterly to the twin evils of significance and subjectification.

So what am I, the subject of this signification, to make of this confrontation with my image? Am I, like Dorian Grey, to be filled with narcissistic anticipation that will turn to fear and shame, as I confront my portrait - the artist's magical mirror that surmises the true worth of my soul?

Perhaps a portrait always shocks as it seduces (like hearing my voice on tape, the familiar cadence somehow sounding alien, becoming other) - the photograph punctures the fantasy image of my body, forces me into the uncomfortable position of being both subject and spectator.

I seek solace on the couch with Lacan: the child sees her image in the mirror and grasps for the first time the possibility of projection into the adult,

signifying world, he tells me, and then probes me about my dreams, my mind's secret places (ask him about his mother, Freud whispers)...

But I cannot stop obsessing over my reflection, poring over its surface, searching for a familiar feature. This image portrays not a potential, but a has been, a 'what has been' – a mirror stage for the middle aged. A reminder of the distance between how I imagine myself in the world (or rather outside the real world, in my head), and how I appear (what others see, how I project into the world), that provokes revulsion and yet still fascinates and draws me back in...

'Beware, my friend, of crystal brook
Or fountain, lest that hideous hook,
Thy nose, thou chance to see;
Narcissus' fate would then be thine,
And self-detested thou would'st pine,
As self-enamoured he.
William Cowper, *On an ugly fellow*.