

No Mere Reflection:  
Mirrors as Windows on Russian Culture

Julia Chadaga  
*Macalester College*

Aleksei Mikhailovich Romanov, who reigned as tsar of Muscovy in the years 1629-76, had something in common with all of us: he studied his own reflection in a mirror, albeit an appropriately majestic mirror nestled in the center of a fan of peacock feathers.<sup>1</sup> As an implement of the tsar's grooming, this object is exceptional, but it is also typical: mirrors in pre-Petrine Russia were usually small and handheld, and they were kept out of sight for reasons both economic and ecclesiastical. In pre-eighteenth century Russia, glass was a luxury item, and the cost of an average mirror was nearly ten times the amount of a typical day's pay (Hellie 21). Prince Vasily Golitsyn, one of the wealthiest men in late Muscovy, owned eighty-one mirrors; the cost of one of the mirrors, twenty rubles, was equal to that of "six slaves" (Hellie 592).<sup>2</sup> Golitsyn's gluttony for reflections had sacrilegious overtones in the context of his times: in Russia prior to Peter the Great's modernizing reforms, a taboo on mirrors prevailed (Pravdivtsev 325-26). Church prohibitions stipulated that mirrors were to remain covered; gazing into mirrors was to be kept at an absolute minimum; on rare occasions, large imported mirrors were hung high on walls, so as to reflect neither people nor large spaces; and the Church Council of 1666-67 forbade members of the clergy to own mirrors altogether (Leonov 359).

Wall mirrors began to appear in Russia in the second half of the seventeenth century; they were hung only in interior rooms such as bedchambers, never in outer rooms used for receptions. These mirrors, framed in carved and embellished wood, were always covered

with taffeta, satin, or velvet curtains on rings, or were locked up in the manner of icon-cases (Volkovskoi 25). Why did mirror owners go to such lengths to keep reflections under control? One reason may be that the face has a particularly important status in Orthodox Christianity: human beings are seen as the image and likeness of God. In fact, the Russian language has several related words to designate the face: *lik* 'visage,' *litso* 'face,' and *lichina* 'mask'—each one in turn showing a progression from sacred to profane.<sup>3</sup> This ambivalent aura around the human face informed the Church prohibitions against mirror gazing; moreover, limiting this practice would also be a way to stem the tide of vanity, which was, after all, a deadly sin.

When we examine the discourse around mirrors in Russia from the medieval period to the modern day, we find a preoccupation with border-crossing and identity that is distinctive to Russian culture along with echoes of mirror lore from other world traditions. Here I will focus on several key functions of the Russian mirror: as a site of self-creation and social interaction, as illusionistic décor, and as a tool for obtaining knowledge. My essay distinguishes between mirrors that reflect human features and those that do not; starting from personal mirrors that convey the features of an individual, the essay moves to mirrors that capture the reflections of multitudes, culminating in a fifteen-story mirror that reflects not people, but the sun, and other architectural mirrors, more recently built, that—literally and figuratively—have generated countless reflections.

### Mirrors Invade Russia

During his grand tour of Europe in 1697-98, Peter the Great took note of the prevailing Baroque aesthetic—the spatial expansion and play of light enabled by mirrors—and brought this influence home with him. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, mirrors in Russia began to enjoy widespread use, were kept uncovered, and tended to be much larger than before: for example, the Vorob'ev factory produced mirrors up to nine feet in length (Asharina 6) (figs. 1-3). Peter himself had four early eighteenth-century English rosewood mirrors in the bedroom of his Summer Palace. His wife Catherine I had six mirrors in her bedroom, including a seventeenth-century Venetian one.



Fig. 1. Mirror with Russian imperial arms and crown, crafted by Charles Kaendler, 1730s. Silver and glass. It is believed that Emperor Peter III (the ill-fated spouse of the future Catherine the Great) received this mirror as a wedding gift. Image from the Digital Collection of the Hermitage Museum, used with permission.



Fig. 2. Mirror in a frame decorated with carved roses and acanthus leaves, 1750-60s. Gilded wood and glass. Image from the Digital Collection of the Hermitage Museum, used with permission.



Fig. 3. Mirror crafted by the Faberge firm, 1892. Wood, silver, and glass. Image from the Digital Collection of the Hermitage Museum, used with permission.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the poet Mikhail Lomonosov revolutionized both the Russian literary language, with his innovations in verse, and the Russian glass industry, with his work at the factory that he founded. Lomonosov revered Peter the Great, dedicating panegyrics and monumental mosaics to the monarch; and akin to his idol, Lomonosov did much to introduce mirrors into Russian interiors. Lomonosov wrote his “Letter on the Usefulness of Glass” (1753) in order to persuade the Empress to provide him with a plot of land where he could situate his glass factory, yet this pragmatic dimension does not begin to account for the enthusiasm and sheer sweep of the poem.<sup>4</sup> This expansive paean to the miraculously versatile material that is glass also contains an implicit celebration of the Russian language as an expressive medium that likewise bends to its master’s will.

Lomonosov’s poem extols the virtues of glass in every form one can imagine, from drinking vessels to barometric spheres. Praised, too, are windows, which let sunlight in while we stay warm inside, and greenhouses, where flowers thrive even in winter; Lomonosov then shifts his focus from transparent to reflective glass: the mention of hothouse flowers turns the poet’s mind to the beauties who use them to play dress-up. Now the fair sex becomes Lomonosov’s addressee, and women’s self-adornment, his topic. Yet Lomonosov

does not condemn women's vanity, as some of his contemporaries do; instead he drinks in the vision of their beautification rituals with the ardor of a Robert Herrick contemplating his beloved clad in silk. Glass plays a crucial role in such rituals, as mirrors enable women's artifice and even double their allure: "No bylo b vashe vse staran'e bez uspekhu, / Nariady vashi by dostoiny byli smekhu, / Kogda b vy v zerkale ne videli sebia. / Vy vdvoe prigozhi, steklo upotrebia" 'Your striving would all come to naught, / And your outfits would be laughable, / If you could not see yourself in a mirror. / You are twice as comely when you use Glass' (Lomonosov 270).

Lomonosov shows how intrinsic glass was to the discoveries of those he champions, from Copernicus to Newton, who, "having learned the laws of rays refracted in Glass," sought to tell the truth about the world. The telescope—whose workings incorporate mirrors—reflects the full glory of God's creation, as does the microscope. It is the transformation of vision enabled by glass, in fact, that liberates our minds and allows us to travel from one state to another: "V bezmernom uglubia prostranstve razum svoi, / Iz mysl'i khodim v mysl', iz sveta v svet inoi" 'Probing infinite space with our reason, / We pass from thought to thought, from this world to the next' (Lomonosov 276). Glass as a material invites a restless movement of the eye, from looking-at to seeing-through and back again; hence it suggests transportation into another realm. Moreover, mirrors, as a unique type of glass object, truly constitute other spaces—a point to which I shall return.

The Claude-glass, which became popular in the eighteenth century, was a mirror that subverted its conventional function and highlighted the spatial aspect of mirror reflection. It was used to reflect not the features of the beholder but the landscape around him; and rather than convey a true likeness of this landscape, such mirrors altered its appearance. These mirrors were round or oval, convex, with a dark backing that depicted the reflected landscape with muted lighting and softened contours. These objects were popular among travelers who wished to make their viewing experience conform more closely to the rules of the picturesque. Such mirrors turned any landscape beheld into a work of art with lighting effects in the style of Claude Lorrain—hence the name. Christopher Thacker cites the recollections of an eighteenth-century traveler in

England mediating every impression with such a mirror. As a consequence of gazing into the Claude-glass with his back turned to the actual scene, he suffered an accident: “Fell down on my back across a dirty lane with my glass open in one hand, but broke only my knuckles: stay’d nevertheless, and saw the sun set in all its glory” (142). This mirror compels its user to literally turn his back on phenomenal reality and thus to reverse himself—to enter, as it were, the world beyond the looking glass.

The Russian glass industry developed rapidly in the second half of the eighteenth century, and all the major centers of glass production were established at this time. Many of the factory owners were members of the aristocracy, such as the appropriately titled *svetleishii* ‘most radiant’ Prince Menshikov and Prince Potemkin, who had been enticed by the prestige and fashionable status of the material (Pyliaev 68). Among the objects made at Potemkin’s factory were pyramids and faceted prisms known as *raiki* ‘little heavens’ (Asharina 14). By the middle of the nineteenth century, mirrors enjoyed a great vogue in Russia’s capital, which Peter had moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg, a city that he established in 1703 and that famously came to be dubbed “a window on Europe.” The city was a window in one sense, and a mirror—or a myriad mirrors—in another, in that its many waterways generated reflections of the city as far as the eye could see. Joseph Brodsky describes how “the ubiquitous presence of water” shapes the experience of being in the city, using language that is not only catoptric, but cinematic:

The twelve-mile-long Neva branching right in the center of the town, with its twenty-five large and small coiling canals, provides this city with such a quantity of mirrors that narcissism becomes inevitable. Reflected every second by thousands of square feet of running silver amalgam, it’s as if the city were constantly being filmed by its river...No wonder that sometimes this city gives the impression of an utter egoist preoccupied solely with its own appearance. (“Guide” 77)

Looking into a mirror is a way to verify and affirm one’s sense of self. Brodsky’s characterization of St. Petersburg, the Western-oriented Russian capital conjured up through Peter the Great’s force of will, is instructive in its emphasis on mirror-gazing because the cre-

ation of this city signified a major change in Russia's identity, from cloistered Muscovy to an enlightened, European nation.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Johann Gustav Kohl, a German traveling through St. Petersburg, reported being struck by the use of glass in upper-class interiors and public gathering places. He contrasted the Russian appetite for mirror images with the customs that prevailed among his German readers:

In the interior of apartments... mirrors are lavished with unheard-of prodigality. In the coffee-houses of Petersburg you frequently see as many large mirrors as among us good copper-plates and pictures. In the private houses, too, the walls are covered with prodigious looking-glasses. (12-13)

In Kohl's account, Russians prefer the ambiguous and dynamic reflected image of themselves in real space, multiplied and fragmented, to the static and conventional images of the world offered by "good copper-plates and pictures."

In light of Peter the Great's crucial role in introducing mirrors into Russian interiors, it is perhaps no coincidence that the following folk speculation arose regarding the modernizing monarch, who broke the taboo against traveling abroad (among others):

Our sovereign and his inner circle went beyond the sea, and he traveled through the foreign lands and visited Stekol'nyi [a corruption of Stekol'm, i.e., Stockholm]. And in the foreign land a maiden rules the Glass Kingdom, and that maiden abused our sovereign; she put him in a hot frying pan, took him out of the frying pan and had him tossed into a dungeon. ... That man is not our sovereign, but a foreigner; our sovereign, while among the foreigners, was sealed into a barrel and cast into the sea. (qtd. in Solov'ev 100; see also the variants on 109 and 111)

According to this popular legend, Peter the Great met an untimely end in the perilous kingdom of Glassland. In ironic contradiction to the transparent name of that kingdom, the emperor, it seems, was hidden from sight in a dungeon, then sealed in a barrel and consigned to the depths of the sea. It was not Peter, but a foreigner—a sinister double!—masquerading as him (just as glass can masquerade as a more precious material, from amethyst to gold), who returned to rule over Russia. Peter should have never traveled

abroad; and he certainly should have never, ever set foot in Glassland.

In this legend, glass becomes invested with several provocative attributes. It is a signifier of the foreign, the alien, the strange; it belongs to the fairy-tale realm, and more broadly, the domain of the imagination. The word *Stekgol'm*, enigmatic-sounding to the Russian ear, mutates into the more comprehensible *Stekol'nyi*, an adjective meaning “of glass.” The foreign city-name acts as an incantation, and a city of glass emerges from a linguistic misapprehension. This invention then generates another: the city of *Stekol'nyi* is part of an entire *stekol'noe tsarstvo* ‘Glass Kingdom’—which comes to stand for all that is hostile and menacing to Russia. The people among whom this legend arose were apparently predisposed to think of glass in such terms.

It is customary to consider glass as synonymous with clarity, yet the Russian legend of Peter’s demise makes Glassland a place where obscurity and darkness reign. Because of its transparency, we have also come to regard glass as a purely functional material—in other words, we do not really regard it at all. We simply look through it at whatever is on the other side. Yet glass is never simply functional; and in Russia, its uses are even more complex, as an example from more recent times shows. Urban dwellers are familiar with the way in which windows in subway cars come to function as mirrors when the trains race through tunnels. As Elena Frolova reports, however, the windows in the Russian metro yield bizarre reflections, for reasons that have to do with an anxiety about foreignness, just like the one that informed the legend of Peter in Glassland:

You’ve probably noticed at one time or another the reflection of the passenger sitting next to you and thought: “What a freak of nature! How can he live with a face like that?” I don’t mean to offend you, but you are, to put it mildly, no beauty yourself (I’m talking about your reflection). On the other hand, if there’s nothing else to do during the ride, you can make funny faces and entertain yourself and the people around you. (Frolova, my trans.)

What is the source of these funhouse-mirror reflections? To create the panes of the windows in question, molten glass is stretched

between a series of rollers, then cooled and polished. This process inevitably leads to distortion, and thus, distorted reflections. Frolova observes that in the West they have devised a way to combat such distortion, because “they don’t appreciate our national form of amusement.” The technique for producing perfectly smooth sheet glass involves floating the molten glass on a pool of molten tin.<sup>5</sup> While other countries have adopted this method, most factories in Russia—including the one where the metro windows are made—still use the old technique that yields distorted glass. On the bright side, Frolova concedes, “You will never be bored riding the metro.”

The windows in a metro car do not always serve as windows, but in the Russian case, even their mirror-function is subverted. Instead of seeing a true likeness, the viewer finds himself changed, as if in a fairy tale, into something freakish and unrecognizable (just as Peter was swapped for a foreign impostor in *Glassland*). Frolova gently chides the backwardness of her compatriots, yet she takes pride in their imaginative reaction to their funhouse reality, enabled by a peculiar kind of glass.

The phenomenon of the inadvertent mirror can be found further back in time, in early Soviet Russia—and this mirror, too, appeared in a subterranean setting. In a curious counterpart to the proliferation of Lenin’s images—in the form of posters, paintings, and sculpture—in the years following his death, when a cult developed around the leader, visitors to his mausoleum in the 1920s and 1930s would peer into his crystalline sarcophagus and see three Lenins: the man himself, and two reflections, thanks to the unusual tilt of the glass walls (“*Protestuiia*”). By 1939, a new sarcophagus was in the works; finished in 1945, it took the form of a rectangular prism with walls tilting at a new angle that eliminated reflections (Kotyrev 137-38). In this shrine built to perpetuate Soviet power, the authentic body of Lenin was analogous to the sacred relics of old, but his reflection was a blasphemous phenomenon and could not be allowed.

Mirror reflections, when unbidden, are uncanny because they create a doubt in the viewer’s mind about what s/he is seeing: a familiar face or a foreign one. Sigmund Freud in his essay “*The Uncanny*” speaks of the double as a literary motif that generates the feeling of the uncanny, and notes that when confronted with one’s

own double, “a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his own true self”; what is even more chilling about seeing one’s double is the memento-mori effect of such an encounter. Freud cites Otto Rank’s argument that “the double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self” and wryly speculates that “the ‘immortal’ soul was the first double of the body.” At a certain point in a person’s psychological development, however, “the meaning of the ‘double’ changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (142)—a mirror reversal from a guarantee of continued existence to a signifier of guaranteed annihilation.

Freud cites his own experience with an unexpected reflection in order to address the question of “how our own image affects us when it confronts us, unbidden and unexpected.” He recalls riding on a train that “lurched violently,” whereupon

the door of the adjacent toilet swung open and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and traveling cap entered my compartment. I assumed that ... he had entered [my compartment] by mistake. I jumped up to put him right, but soon realized to my astonishment that the intruder was my own image, reflected in the mirror on the connecting door. I can still recall that I found his appearance thoroughly unpleasant ... [Was this displeasure] perhaps a vestige of the archaic reaction to the “double” as something uncanny? (161-62 emphasis in the original)

Mirrors not only offer a virtual space that lies beyond their surface, but they generate images that become intruders into our own world. Freud’s experience with his double occurs on a train, a site that Frolova likewise describes as a site of unbidden reflections. The anxiety about reflections played out on a massive scale in Russia during the construction boom of the late 1990s, when a multitude of glass-fronted skyscrapers appeared in the urban landscape, and the press documented the popular dismay at the proliferation of reflections that these buildings generated.<sup>6</sup> When we recall the prohibitions against mirror-gazing that existed in pre-Petrine Russia, we realize that this unease over mirror reflections has a lineage that is centuries old.

## Mirrors as Texts and Texts as Mirrors

Mirrors have never been mere generators of reflections; as objects with symbolic as well as utilitarian functions, they have generated a variety of conflicting metaphors. In Peter the Great's time, the word mirror referred not only to looking glasses, but also to didactic publications, as seen in the proliferation throughout Europe of books of an edifying character with the word mirror in the title (for example, the German *Mirror for Princes*).<sup>7</sup> Many such works reached eighteenth-century Russia in translation and were soon joined by native versions; the best known of these is *The True Mirror of Youth*, whose publication was ordered by Peter's decree in 1717. It was designed for the young nobility and set forth standards for proper behavior in a new, Western-oriented Russia. In contrast to the commonplace association of mirrors with superficiality and vanity, the mirror here was made to connote the rules of propriety and thus a concern with one's inner condition (Goldberg 127).<sup>8</sup> An astronomical chart published in Russia in 1717, which addressed itself to "industrious youths and persons of any age who desire to understand the movement of the heavens and the Earth according to the treatise of Copernicus," was titled *The New Celestial Mirror*—in other words, this publication purported to capture and reflect the starry skies for readers eager to learn about them.

The reflective qualities of mirrors invited both sacred and profane associations: spiritual insight on the one hand, vanity on the other. As instruments of self-absorption, mirrors became wildly popular during the Renaissance. Widespread censure of such blatant displays of vanity, which were seen as signs of moral collapse, resulted in a new, clandestine accessory: now dandies and ladies of fashion carried around pocket mirrors disguised as tiny prayer books (Goldberg 143). This phenomenon, with its movement from the sacred to the profane (masquerading as the sacred) can itself be seen as a mirror reflection—let us not forget that mirrors create reverse images, not perfect copies—of the evolution of the book-as-mirror metaphor.

The didactic associations of mirrors are central to Vladimir Lukin's one-act comedy *Shchepetil'nik* 'The Trinket-Dealer' (1765), based on Robert Dodsley's *The Toy-Shop* (1735).<sup>9</sup> The play is structured around a series of confrontations between customer and com-

modity, each resulting in a moral lesson grounded in materialism. When the first customer, a flighty woman, requests to see a mirror, the shop owner responds by describing a special mirror made of “the best glass in the world” that strips away pretenses and shows pretenders for who they are; it paradoxically reflects not the polished outside of a gallant or a coquette, but rather the false and corrupt inner self (104). Interestingly, in the analogous scene in Dodsley’s play, the prospective customer decides against this purchase: “Lord, I’m afraid to look in it, methinks, lest it should show me more of my Faults than I care to see” (15). Lukin’s characters, however, have no such qualms; this line is elided in his version. The exposing mirror in Lukin’s play is one of several optical devices that the shopkeeper offers for sale; these devices, in a hypostasized demonstration of their actual powers, show in a true light the foibles of human nature to would-be customers. As Russian secular literature developed concurrently with the glass industry, the latter yielded optical devices after which literature sought to model itself, and Lukin along with his contemporaries presented their works as true mirrors that not only reflected but also educated the public.

Vasilii Narezhnyi’s novel *A Russian Gil Blas* (1814), like *The Trinket Dealer*, is another mirroring of a Western work, and both texts offer insights into how Russians responded to the new presence of mirrors in their midst. A mirror serves as a central prop in Narezhnyi’s novel. It first appears in a description (Chapter V) of the protagonist Chistiakov posing in front of a “fragment of mirror cemented to the wall” (the fact that he can only afford a mirror fragment is telling in itself) before setting out to woo the daughter of the village elder—only to be sent packing (62). The mirror-fragment later reappears (Chapter IX) when Chistiakov reports that his bride-to-be, Feklusha, “could not stop looking at herself in the shards of my mirror” (85). Narezhnyi builds the two chapters on a model of buoyed hopes and crafty schemes that dissolve in humiliation.

Both the hero and heroine of Narezhnyi’s novel imagine that their lineage signifies real status, when in fact it has become a meaningless tag. Chistiakov is convinced that the elder will not refuse him: “He will be afraid to insult the exalted station of my ancestors, and me myself, armed with this cutlass here, which proves by its own antiquity the antiquity of my noble home” (62). Later Chistia-

kov urges Feklusha to remember her distinguished lineage: “You’re not a bit worse than a bride from overseas, and what’s more, you’re a princess” (82). That both of these moments occur in scenes of dressing up in front of a mirror suggests, in a context in which hereditary rank has lost its meaning, the empty theatricality of each character’s desperate performance.<sup>10</sup> Narezhnyi’s novel presents the mirror as a symbol of vanity, but also as a site of simultaneous self-creation and self-deception, or misrecognition, and these meanings are part of the complex of associations that continue to accompany the mirror in our time.

### Mirrors and Mysticism

The figurative function of mirrors manifested itself in the literary realm as well as in visual media. In the Russian translation of *Symbola et Emblemata* (1705), images of mirrors appear with such captions as “It spares no faults,” “I tell the truth,” and, in a tableau in which a heart is burned by the sun’s rays reflected off a catoptric lens, “I burn but am not consumed” (fig. 4). The last image curiously juxtaposes the iconography of the Bible with that of the modern empirical quest and suggests that in the Baroque imagination science and mysticism were in equal measure a part of the mirror’s aura and not very far apart. A similar combination of the empirical and the mystical is found in a Russian oral legend about a mirror that once belonged to Pyotr Tchaikovsky. This mirror still hangs in the hall of his former residence in Klin, converted to a house-museum following his death in 1893. Witnesses attest to having seen the face of the late composer in the mirror. It is believed that the silver amalgam in the backing of the

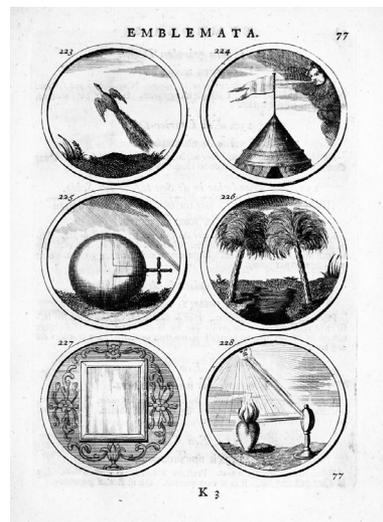


Fig. 4. A page from *Symbola et Emblemata* (1705). The texts corresponding to the bottom two images (provided on the facing page of the book) read “I tell the truth” and “I burn but am not consumed.” Image located at <http://www.archive.org/details/symbolaetemblem00lafa>.

mirror acted as a photographic plate to capture Tchaikovsky's repeatedly reflected image.<sup>11</sup>

The Tchaikovsky mirror is a mix of folklore and science. It evokes the Shroud of Turin and appears as another type of miracle as well: a self-creating daguerreotype. This example underscores the mystical associations around mirrors that persist to this day, fueled by a belief in remembered reflections. A leap of faith once allowed people to see mirrors as containers capable of holding on to the reflection of a sacred sight. In Germany during the Renaissance, pilgrims traveled to designated shrines every seven years and captured the images of holy relics in small mirrors, which they then carried back to their native villages as evidence of their encounter with the divine. Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of movable type, became involved in the manufacture of these mirrors (Goldberg 138-39). The notion of a mirror as an object with the capacity to capture and contain is prominent in Russian myths and superstitions. This may help to account for the increasing popularity in Russia of *feng shui*, an ancient Chinese practice that advocates the strategic placement of mirrors inside the home in order to deflect and attract negative and positive energy, respectively. A current Russian website devoted to real estate cites a number of *feng shui*-based principles of mirror placement:

Avoid mirrors in the bedroom: in our sleep we release negative emotions, and if a mirror near the bed reflects them back, you risk waking up not feeling rested.... As for mirrored tiles, they propagate troubles throughout the whole house because they create truly chaotic reflections. Avoid them like the plague, for they "slice up" a person's reflection into parts, and in so doing they generate negative energy....However, if you situate a mirror so that it will reflect a stream or a garden, it will "attract" their valuable energy. A mirror behind the stove will "double" your food, and therefore, your prosperity too.<sup>12</sup>

Russian traditional culture envisions the mirror as not merely a reflecting surface but as a container and a channel, and Russians today seem especially receptive to the principles of *feng shui*, which present the mirror in similar terms.

The definition of *zerkalo* 'mirror,' in Vladimir Dal's four-vol-

ume *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language*, published in 1883-86, provides a thumbnail sketch of the cultural resonance that mirrors had accrued by then. The articulation of these deep-seated associations provides a key for reading the significance of mirrors in Russia in later periods as well. Dal' defines *zerkalo* as "a fairly smooth metal or glass board that reflects objects" and reports that "glass mirrors are blackened from underneath or covered with tin or mercury" (680). A cow mirror, according to Dal', signifies the fine hair on the bovine hindquarters, whose degree of luster was used to assess the animal's milking capacity. This part of the cow's body was perceived as mirror-like, for both its reflective quality and its ability to convey information accurately. The term mirror also appeared in the lexicon of card sharks, designating "a little mirror sewn onto a handkerchief, or a large, smooth gold ring, or a snuffbox with a smooth surface" (680), used by a player (in a four-player game) to reveal his hand to his partner, allowing both to cheat and reap the benefits—providing yet more evidence of the link between mirrors and immoral behavior. These two examples of *zerkalo* usage illustrate the split personality of the mirror in Russian culture (reflecting such a split in Western culture more broadly): the object was associated with both truth and deception.<sup>13</sup>

Dal' cites a number of popular beliefs about the powers of a mirror, including the following: "If you break a mirror, you will come to harm"; "Mirrors in a house where a dead man lies are covered up so that he won't be able to see himself in them"; "If you stretch or eat in front of a mirror, you will fall ill and wither away"; and "She ought to have her fortune told in front of a little mirror (*zerkal'tse*)," which Dal' helpfully glosses as "it's time to get married."<sup>14</sup> Not only cows, but human beings can themselves function as mirrors, as Dal' demonstrates when he provides another meaning for *zerkal'tse*: "the pupil of the eye" (6680-81).<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin may have had this meaning in mind when he depicted in his essay "Art and Answerability" (1919) the tableau of two people in dialogue, each seeing her own reflection in the eyes of her interlocutor (23); and John Donne's seventeenth-century lyric "The Good-morrow" captures in mirroring syntax that moment of intimacy when "My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears."



Fig. 5. Interior of the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo designed by Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, 1752-56. Reproduced from A. I. Leonov, ed. *Russkoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo. 18-i vek.* Vol. 2. Moscow: Izd. Akademii Khudozhestv, 1963, 55.

### Mirrors in Space and Space in Mirrors

Now let us move from mirrors in small personal spaces to ever larger public spaces, and to the infinite virtual spaces that every mirror contains. The multiplication of mirrors in Russian interiors was part of a wholesale revolution in architecture in the wake of the Petrine reforms, which translated into buildings that let in more light and air, and that had expanded interior spaces, thinner walls, and lighter constructions. Improved lighting technology as well as extensive use of wall mirrors and the optical capacities of faceted glass in chandeliers gradually led to brighter interiors (Voronov and Dubova 10). Baroque architects painstakingly arranged mirrors so as to best reflect the room's various sources of light. Sconces and other light fixtures were attached to mirrors so that every lit candle would be reflected therein (Leonov 344-47). Mirrors and windows alternated with one another, creating the illusion of expanded space. This effect can be seen in the Italian House at the Kuskovo estate near Moscow and in the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo designed by Rastrelli (fig. 5). Designers in contemporary Russia similarly emphasize the illusion-making potential of mirrors to transform interior spaces.<sup>16</sup>

Nikolai Chernyshevsky incorporated such strategic use of mirrors into the design of the utopian Crystal Palace in his 1862 novel,

*What Is to be Done?* Inside the Crystal Palace, “all the intervals between the windows are covered with enormous mirrors” (284), a detail evoking the interior of a lavish eighteenth-century palace. Indeed, Walter Benjamin notes that utopias, when translated into visual terms, are simultaneously forward- and backward-looking (148-49). The mirrors not only expand the space but also make the objects within it proliferate, seeming to multiply the abundance.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, utopian architectural projects throughout Europe called for extensive use of glass, a material that, owing to its optical properties, took on a significance transcending its utilitarian value. Paul Scheerbart and his fellow thinkers wrote that replacing brick buildings with ones of glass would bring about “a paradise on earth.” Scheerbart proclaims that brick buildings should give way to glass architecture, which will adorn the face of the earth like “sparkling jewels”; the world will become “as splendid as the gardens of the Arabian nights. We should then have a paradise on earth, and no need to watch in longing expectation for the paradise in heaven” (46). Scheerbart, however, does not embrace all forms of glass with equal enthusiasm; he hesitates before the duplicitous portal of the mirror and places such objects squarely in the realm of utility rather than beauty:

[O]ne should only allow the quicksilver effects of mirrors a utilitarian existence in the dressing-room. In other rooms of the house the mirror-effects, which continue to reflect their surroundings again and again in a different light, disturb the general architectural impression, for they do not last. When kaleidoscopic effects are wanted, they are perfectly justified. Otherwise it is best to do without the quicksilver-mirror; for it is dangerous—like poison. (47-48)

Scheerbart plays on the visual resemblance of mercury to the metal amalgam of a mirror to underscore his point about the evasive visual impression created by a mirror, just as mercury that has escaped its container eludes attempts to retrieve it, contrasted with the steady and constant effect of light through colored glass. Scheerbart then turns this visual trickery of the mirror into a sign of its treachery—“it is dangerous—like poison”—this time reinforcing the argument with reference to the toxicity of mercury (which mirrors at one

point did contain).<sup>17</sup> Here again we note an unease about mirrors that seems to stem from their capacity to capture and convey the human likeness.

While Constructivists in Russia designed projects for utopian glass houses, theirs was a largely paper architecture: glass was expensive and difficult to obtain in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially after the Bolshevik revolution (Boldyrev 332). Large-scale production of transparent sheets of window glass did not become possible in Russia until 1926 (Babakhanov 25). Even in that year, the journal *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 'Contemporary Architecture' bluntly reported that "today there is no glass on the Soviet market" (63). Evgenii Zamiatin thus drew on all the resources of his imagination to create, in the world's first anti-utopia, titled *We* (*My* 1921), a realm called the One State where not only the buildings, but also the sidewalks, the furniture, some of the clothing ("glass silk," Zamyatin 53), and virtually everything else is made of glass. Zamiatin's insight into the effect that reflections have on the human psyche provides an illuminating framework in which to examine the use of mirrors in the extra-literary realm. The narrator of Zamiatin's novel, D-503, extols the perfect transparency, and by association, the efficiency and purity of the glass walls within which he and his fellow citizens dwell, but this transparency is put into question as D's diary unfolds. Disturbing optical phenomena manifest themselves; it is shown that every window, every medium, alters perception in some way.

The optical effects of glass serve as a counterpoint to the transparency that the One State values. One of the most important optical qualities of glass overlooked by the State is reflection. D starts noticing the reflective qualities of the surface on which he walks ("that limpid, mirrorlike point of the pavement ... the mirror-smooth pavement") during an episode in which he sees a woman who takes a tremendous risk in breaking from the ranks and whom he mistakes for his beloved I-330. He flings himself toward her, but is relieved to see, at the last second, that it is not she: "Not her! Not I" (127).<sup>18</sup> In the context of the mirrorlike pavement, "I" can be read here as an aspect of D's own self. (Zamiatin purposely chose the Latin letter I to designate the heroine's name.<sup>19</sup>) The reflective capacity of the glass surfaces around D allows him to arrive at the realization

that there are two selves inside him—a compliant self and a self that longs to rebel.

A doctor uses the image of reflective glass to describe D's condition: he has acquired a soul, which can be thought of as mirrored glass that is all surface, but suddenly takes on depth.

Take a plane, a surface—this mirror, say. And on this surface are you and I ... But imagine this impermeable substance softened by some fire; and nothing slides across it any more, everything enters into it, into this mirror world that we examined with such curiosity when we were children. ... The cold mirror reflects, but this one absorbs—forever. A moment, a faint line on someone's face—and it remains in you forever. (89)

The revelation of the mirror's depth pushes D to recognize his own interiority. Note too that the doctor speaks of the wonder with which children contemplate the mirrors that adults use in strictly utilitarian ways—to check the degree to which their exterior conforms to the norms of their society and/or to their own image of themselves. Recovering that sense of wonder in contemplating the mirror world can serve as a journey back in time; the mirror, then, becomes a potential fountain of youth.

After a life-changing encounter with I-330, D feels split in two, and glass plays a necessary role as a mirror in what is essentially a *doppelgänger* scenario—yet it is not the beginning of madness, but of lucidity. D stands before a mirror and sees himself “clearly, for the first time” (59)—he sees himself as an unrecognizable other and the mirror, not as a flat reflective surface but a bottomless depth, so that he is looking simultaneously here and there. The sensation enabled by mirrors of being at once here and elsewhere inspires Michel Foucault's analysis of mirrors in the context of what he calls the heterotopia: a real site (in contrast to the utopia, which is by definition unreal) in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” Foucault identifies the mirror as a “mixed, joint experience” between the utopia and the heterotopia:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up beyond the surface...But it is also a heterotopia

in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy... The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (24)

It is notable that Zamiatin uses the heterotopia of the mirror as an instrumental object to deconstruct the very idea of a utopia.

Let us recall the story about Peter in Glassland, which was generated by a profound anxiety about border-crossing that manifests itself in a number of ways in traditional Russian culture.<sup>20</sup> To cite one example of a tradition that has survived into the modern day, Russians will often refuse to shake hands or interact with another person in any other way over a threshold—both participants must be on the same side of this perilous boundary. In this light, the unease (and its flip side, the fascination) before mirrors peculiar to Russia can be traced to the idea of the mirror being a space into which we travel, whether we want to or not, just as soon as we look into it. Russians designate the space reflected in the mirror with a concrete noun: *zazerkal'e*, which may be rendered literally as ‘that-which-is-beyond-the-mirror.’ Thus, the Russian language renders the virtual space inside the looking-glass that much more real. The word *zazerkal'e* is a coinage tellingly analogous to the word *zarubezh'e* ‘that which is abroad’ formed from the prefix *za* ‘beyond’ and the noun *rubezh* ‘border.’ Mirrors are in fact at the center of a popular Russian superstition involving border-crossing: if you leave the house and need to return for any reason, you must glance into the mirror—otherwise, an unforeseen calamity may prevent you from traveling any farther (Grushko and Medvedev 167-68; Brodsky “In A Room and a Half” 491).

Umberto Eco recognizes “the magic of the mirror ... in the fact that its extensiveness-intrusiveness allows us, both to have a better look at the world, and to look at ourselves as anybody else might” (220-21).<sup>21</sup> The mirror offers the beholder a way to travel into a different space; and this idea is activated in stories in which the hero gets transported into the looking-glass. There is an established literary tradition of fantastic tales in which a doppelgänger emerges

from a magical mirror, and Russian literature participates in this tradition in ways peculiar to it. Valerii Briusov's "In the Mirror" (1901) and Aleksandr Chaianov's "The Venetian Mirror, or the Remarkable Adventures of a Glass Man" (1922) are two stories on the theme of catoptrophilia in which the protagonists switch identities with their reflections. The texts can be placed in the *Doppelgänger* tradition, but they are also exceptional in their reinvention of it.

By the time that these two stories were written, plate glass had come into wider use and there emerged a kind of spectacular subjectivity, suggested by the image of multiple store-front reflections of passersby who simultaneously see themselves and others seeing them. Vladimir Mayakovsky, speaking for the Futurists at a public lecture in 1913, defined beauty as the frenetic street life of the urban crowd and enormous shop windows reflecting the images of trams, trucks, and automobiles flying by (Kamenskii 31-32). The interaction of the shop windows and the crowds creates an environment of multiple reflection and aesthetic inspiration. Isobel Armstrong discusses this phenomenon in the context of nineteenth-century England: the human sensorium begins to respond to

the new production of mass-produced transparency in which one's body can be, glancingly, inadvertently, reflected back from the environment, belonging to the urban phantasmagoria outside one's control. For the first time in our culture, perhaps, the self can be a mirage returned from the surfaces of the city's landscape. (124)

In the Russian context, such modernist works as Iurii Olesha's *Zavist'* 'Envy' (1927) depict and reflect upon the psychological impact of this phenomenon.

Earlier I discussed the origins of the mirror-book metaphor. One of the sources of this analogy had to do with the physical form of mirrors, which up through the seventeenth century were convex and thus reduced whatever they reflected. As Anna Torti explains, when printed books "in which pre-existing material is re-presented in a condensed form" began to appear, observers noted the double function of reflection and reduction that books and mirrors had in common (24-25). In the twentieth century, street mirrors took on this function of capturing and conveying the outside world. Eco speaks of the mirror as a prosthesis in the sense that it "extends the

organ's range of action... it allows us to catch visual stimuli from where our eye could not reach" (220), and mirrors placed in public spaces indeed served this prosthetic function, allowing people to see the space in back of them as well as around corners. As such, street mirrors were an ideal device for surveillance, whether used by police officers or those attempting to flee them.

The street mirror that appears halfway through *Envy*, however, exceeds its utilitarian purpose and offers the potential for liberating optical play. The novel's antihero, Kavalero, loves such mirrors because they allow him to break out of the prison of his ego and study the vibrant world around him; and because the world is in motion, the mirror generates the illusion of time moving backward: objects that had already disappeared from view now swim back into Kavalero's field of vision: "A tram that had just vanished from your sight once again speeds along in front of you, slicing along the edge of the boulevard like a knife through a cake. A straw hat suspended on a sky-blue ribbon looped through someone's arm (you had just now seen it, it had attracted your attention, but you had no time to look back), returns to you and glides past before your eyes" (49). These details are poignant because Kavalero is a man who has missed his chance; he is one of the so-called *byvshie liudi* 'has-beens' (literally "former people"). This chapter culminates in Kavalero's meeting with his mentor Ivan, mediated by the street mirror, which has the power to reverse time. In a novel written a decade after the Bolshevik coup and ambivalent about what the Revolution has wrought, such a presentation of the street mirror, placed on the street in practical terms for the purpose of surveillance and social control, is provocative indeed.

Street mirrors figure prominently in Sergei Eisenstein's first feature-length film, *Strike* (1925), depicting a strike from 1905 as a paradigmatic example from the history of the workers' movement. A series of mirrors command the camera's attention, but each of them deviates from its conventional function as a reflecting surface in which an individual contemplates his own image. This is fitting in light of the film's depiction of what happens when workers go on strike, and their machines stop. The mirror is, after all, a form of technology, and its function, too, gets subverted by Eisenstein's film.

When the workers abandon the factory, the effect is unprecedented: the world turns upside down, as seen in the carnivalesque episode when the strikers dethrone their oppressors, conveying them in wheelbarrows down to the river in what Yuri Tsivian, in his commentary to the film, calls a “mock-execution.” In fact, *Strike* begins with an image of the world literally upside down: just a few minutes into the film, we see a man’s legs reflected upside down and distorted in rippling water; then we see the film running backward and discover that the legs belong to a factory spy who has been following a group of conspiring workers. The spy walks backward out of the frame, to be replaced by strike leaders heatedly discussing something. This sequence prepares us for the important role that reflections will play in the rest of the film.

In the fourth section of the film, the strikers’ luck begins to change, and a desperately poor worker is shown taking his family’s only mirror to the flea market to be sold. He tosses it down on the floor on top of his wife’s shawl and other clothes that he is planning to sell, and the mirror lies face-up, chaotically reflecting the space around it. The couple fight over their child’s underclothes, which the worker finally flings on top of the pile, and then the child himself is plunked on top of the mirror, where he sits, distraught and wiping his eyes (figs. 6-8). This sequence is followed by the intertitle: “Hunting the Red Beast.” Tsivian points out that this phrase has two meanings: the factory spy nicknamed the Fox is a “red beast,” but so are the communists whom he is hunting, not realizing that they are on to him and that soon, the hunter



Fig. 6. From Eisenstein’s *Strike*. The worker takes down the mirror.



Fig. 7. From Eisenstein’s *Strike*. The mirror on top of the clothes.



Fig. 8. From Eisenstein’s *Strike*. The child on top of the mirror.

will become the hunted. Reflecting surfaces dominate the screen at the beginning of this sequence, gesturing at this reversal of fortune, which is a major structuring motif throughout the film. Following the intertitle, an oval street mirror fills the frame; the Fox approaches it and checks his reflection. We next see a large glass sphere that reflects the bustling street life; the Fox is caught in the mirror as well (and reflected upside down), and the two strike leaders spot him (figs. 9-11). According to Tsivian, these spheres were filled with water and placed in drugstore windows in Russia, “which made drugstores perfect places to check whether someone is watching you.” The workers use mirrors in a strategic way—not to study their own faces, but to watch for danger and protect the collective.

In the film’s final mirror image, a factory spy approaches the King of the underworld to solicit his services in sabotaging the strike; the King spits out a stream of liquor onto the mirror during his morning ablutions, and looks at his own smiling, distorted reflection. The factory spy at the beginning of the film likewise had a distorted reflection; Eisenstein thus demonizes both characters through visual means. The King calls out, “I need five unconscionable ones,” and his cohorts reply, “None of us has a conscience.” In this film, those who collaborate with the powers that be are shown contemplating their own reflections—they are looking out for number one, not for one another. Presented as a solitary, self-absorbed activity, mirror-gazing is condemned within



Fig. 9. From Eisenstein’s *Strike*. The Fox approaches the street mirror.



Fig. 10. From Eisenstein’s *Strike*. Strike leaders inside the drugstore.

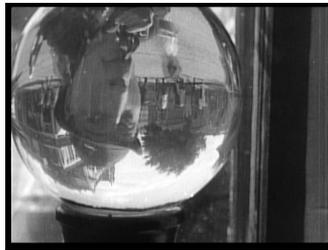


Fig. 11. From Eisenstein’s *Strike*. The Fox is caught in the spherical mirror.

the framework of Eisenstein's revolutionary aesthetics.

The mirror images in *Strike* resonate hauntingly with Eisenstein's account of a cryptic episode from the time he served in the Red Army in spring of 1919, recorded in his memoirs from the 1940s. What is significant is that he chooses to set it down, then struggles, seemingly without success, to make sense of it:

I sleep on the surface of a mirror in Dvinsk. In the apartment hastily allotted to me—after the Red Army has taken Dvinsk—there are no beds left... But a mirrored wardrobe stands proudly in the empty room. The wardrobe lies on its back. A straw mattress lies down on top of the mirrored surface of its doors that reflect the world. I lie on the mattress. My God, how much I'd like to make a metaphorical interpretation or an image out of this! But nothing comes. So I shall leave myself lying on the straw mattress, placed between me and the mirrors of the wardrobe doors... (Eisenstein *Selected* 138-39)<sup>22</sup>

Eisenstein makes a show of not understanding the import of this mysterious event from his early life. He shies away from attempting a sophisticated, baroque interpretation of the meaning of the mirrored wardrobe, and leaves the object alone—in fact, he underscores its proud solitude.<sup>23</sup> Yet it seems that the interpretation is there, waiting to be discovered. No image comes to Eisenstein as he contemplates the memory, and indeed, by covering the mirror “that reflected the world” with crude straw and then with his own body, the future filmmaker effectively prevents any image from emerging. The straw mattress, the Red Army's contribution to the décor of the expropriated room, serves to block Eisenstein's access to the mirror world.

The mirror-covering in Eisenstein's account hints at the mystical associations around this object. The act of covering a mirror has currency in religious practice: recall that Dal' attests to the Russian custom of covering mirrors in a house of mourning. Eisenstein is suggesting that the war communism scenario is also an occasion for mourning—the Old World has been annihilated, and according to folk belief, covering the mirror prevents the soul of the deceased from becoming trapped in the mirror-world forever. Moreover, that trapped reflection might be seen by the living and frighten them to

death, and so, all visible traces of pre-revolutionary Russia must be obliterated.<sup>24</sup>

Mirrors have long been reputed to contain the power of prophecy. What did this particular mirror presage? A year later Eisenstein would appear on stage for the first time, in A. Averchenko's *The Double* and as a clown in F. M. Sluchainyi's *The Mirror* (Leyda and Voynow 153). Three years after that he would make his first film (*Glumov's Diary*), and the optical lenses prefigured by the mirror on which he once slept would come to play a leading role in his life, his thought, and his way of seeing the world.

Yet there is another, more distressing meaning here as well. Sleeping on a mirror is akin to sleeping atop an abyss—not only because of the fragility of glass, of which Eisenstein was all too aware, but because *zazerkale* 'the space beyond the mirror' looms as a chasm in the writings of the Symbolists, and in literary works and folklore stretching back in time for centuries. We recall the strange image in *Strike* of the child sitting on the mirror—poised over an abyss—to which the camera returns again and again. This image prefigures the harrowing sequence at the end of the film when the police besieging the workers' building grab a child (who has been shown in the film several times before, thus eliciting an especially keen emotional response in the viewer), suspend him over the stairwell, and throw him down to his death. In Eisenstein's recollection, the straw mattress serves as a flimsy "veil over the abyss." It is in this fraught state of suspension that Eisenstein recalls his twenty-year-old self. The concluding sentence of this entry, "So I shall leave myself lying on the straw mattress..." suggests that the terrifying sensation of lying stretched out over an abyss is still with the middle-aged Eisenstein as he writes these lines, a coded reference to his fate as a visionary artist under the Stalinist regime.

In his films, Eisenstein wielded mirrors to achieve expressionistic cinematic effects: for example, his cinematographer Eduard Tisse used sunlight reflected off a large mirror as a spotlight of sorts, "marking out hard-edged blocks of space or endowing objects and faces with sculptural gleams" (Bordwell 46). Using a mirror to cast light creates a phenomenon that is not designated by any single word in English, but in Russian is materialized in a concrete term—akin to *zazerkale*—suggesting a certain mindfulness about optical

phenomena that is unique to Russian culture. The beam of light that bounces off a mirror or other reflective surface and hops along the walls and ceiling is known in Russian as a *solnechnyi zaichik* 'solar bunny.' This bunny is not always an innocent creature: in Olesha's *Envy*, it appears as a troubling reminder of time's passing (40); it can be threatening, as a gleam of reflected light purposefully aimed into the victim's eye (indeed, this capacity of mirrors to capture and redirect light has even found application on the battlefield)<sup>25</sup>; and it can imperil the one who unknowingly sends the solar flare into the world, as Timothy Colton documents:

[Stalin's] daily commute took his armor-plated Packard convertible through the Arbat area... Fanatical security accompanied him everywhere. A near-sighted housewife, who had the misfortune of trying to read a clock across [Arbat Street] out her apartment window just as his car wallowed by, was arrested when the sunlight glinted off her opera glasses. This happened in 1949; she did not see Moscow again until her release from a Siberian camp in 1955. (323)

The sunlight reflected off glass in this incident served as a key component of a building under construction in Moscow at exactly this time, using the labor of those who had been arrested, often under equally false pretenses (Colton 336-37). This building, the first Soviet skyscraper, was distinguished by a spire that was secretly a mirror, designed to reflect sunlight and to glorify Soviet power through this dazzling display. But as we shall see, the mirror refused to behave itself; the glass rebelled, as it were, and refused to serve the Soviet state in an uncanny instance of what one might call poetic justice.

The Constructivist dream of all-glass buildings whose windows would overtake the function of walls gave way in Stalin's time to buildings that constituted a triumph of heavy opacity. Yet in the famous Stalinist Gothic high-rises built after World War II, glass reasserted itself in the form of the spire, which became the distinctive feature, one could say the trademark, of these still-standing monuments to Stalin. Moscow State University (MGU) was the first of the seven high-rises (Tarkhanov and Kavtaradze 141; Papernyi 126). Its spire, meant to evoke the architecture of the Kremlin, in particu-

lar the spire of the Spasskaya tower, at sixty meters is taller than a fifteen-story building, and topped by an enormous star that weighs twelve tons (Kuleshov and Pozdnev 181-82). The spire of MGU is a decorative element that draws attention to the monumental height of this building, which was constructed to be the tallest in Europe—inheriting the mantle of the unrealized Palace of Soviets.

The MGU spire may be the world's largest optical illusion. It is made of orange-yellow glass covering an aluminum backing that, when the sun strikes it, resembles gold. The same kind of glass embellishes the sides of the clock face and the gigantic star (fig. 12). The builders of MGU turned to glass when seeking an economical alternative to covering the spire with gold. By adding carbon to the molten mixture, they were able to produce a special golden-yellow glass; they applied pulverized aluminum to the reverse side of rectangular panes of glass and then attached these to the steel girders of the spire (Levinson et al. 167). Some of the mirror pieces are large, while others are as small as the palm of a person's hand, and affixed with nails. During the perestroika period, journalist Dmitrii Semenov described the spire as being "like a mirror, only an orange one. Nowadays hardly anyone knows about it, even among the students, but at one time the designers were very proud of their unusual solution—it was both cheap and beautiful" ("Pervyi sovetskii neboskreb" 3).

The falsification of the MGU spire is double: it is made of glass masquerading as gold and it conceals a top-secret communication device. In an article written in May 1991, Semenov reported that it was possible to climb up into the very star at the top of the spire, but he and his crew chose not to do so because "it's dangerous there right now—too slippery" ("Pervyi" 3). Yet in a follow-up article written just five months later, the author admitted that he and his crew had not been permitted to ascend because the star housed "a high-frequency radio ... Phrases that seemed 'slippery' were removed from the article" ("Etazhi so znakom minus" 1). In the latter article, Semenov is more open about whose operations the



Fig. 12. The spire of Moscow State University (MGU). Image located at [www.mospromstroy.com/objects/built/msu/](http://www.mospromstroy.com/objects/built/msu/), used with permission.

star conceals: the deep sub-basement of the building houses “the headquarters of what appears to be the Moscow directorate of the KGB,” and the agents employed therein were the ones who forbade him to investigate further.

The MGU spire is a mirror that reflects not human features but the sky—recalling the early eighteenth-century mirrors placed so high that they reflected nothing but the ceiling (as in the ballroom of the Menshikov Palace, built 1710-1727, in St. Petersburg). This anti-mirror represents the effacement of the human subject in another way as well, in that the spire acts as a substitute for a human figure: originally, a statue of Lomonosov, then of Lenin, was to crown the building. In this way, the radiance of the spire stands in for the radiance of Lenin. The spire constituted an attempt to play a trick by using, literally, a trick of light. Yet the plan backfired when the fragility of the glass asserted itself. The glass pieces began to break off, and sharp fragments showered the observation platform at the base of the spire, which had to be closed as a result (“Pervyi sovetskii neboskreb” 3) (fig. 13). Just before the 1980 Olympics, the university made an attempt to spruce up the spire, but the results were less than stellar. The MGU administration hired freelance steeplejacks to install new orange glass to the top of the spire. Unfortunately, the new glass panes soon fell out as well. In a recent article, Semenov reports that the MGU mirror requires constant upkeep: “[F]rom time to time, a worker has to haul up onto his shoulders a crate full of mirror pieces, take along a glass-cutter, and climb up to the spire. Glass is a fragile thing” (“Taina zheleznoi dveri”).



Fig. 13. A fragment of glass from the MGU spire. Image located at [http://nmm.ru/blogs/a92/pod\\_shpilem\\_bashni\\_mgu/](http://nmm.ru/blogs/a92/pod_shpilem_bashni_mgu/). Photograph by Sergey Dolya, used with permission.

Yet let us not succumb to the temptation to view the MGU spire simply as a means to ridicule Soviet illusion-making; let us instead allow another reading of this object as a celebration of mirrors and glass whose optical qualities and even fragility are to be cherished. In contemporary Moscow, reflective glass has been reshaping the cityscape in dramatic ways; buildings such as the Crystal Island complex designed by Norman Foster have stirred up controversy

while still in the planning stages. Already standing in the western part of the capital, with more spectacular structures in the works, the Moscow International Business Center presents a vast mirrored façade to the rest of the world (fig. 14). The center was initially known as *Moskva-Siti* 'Moscow City'; the linguistic code-switching in the name, from Russian to English, positions Moscow as a modern, European metropolis—a new Petersburg! Fredric Jameson's discussion of the Westin Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles offers insight into the sometimes hostile reception of skyscrapers appearing in Moscow in recent years: he speaks of the building's



Fig. 14. The façade of a skyscraper under construction in the Moscow International Business Center. Photograph by Matthew Thrasher, used with permission.

disjunction from the surrounding city... The great reflective glass skin of the Bonaventure...repels the city outside, a repulsion for which we have analogies in those reflector sunglasses which make it impossible for your interlocutor to see your own eyes and thereby achieve a certain aggressivity toward and power over the Other. In a similar way, the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighborhood: it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it. (41-42)

However, there is more than one way to read a mirror, and several factors complicate the reception of reflective surfaces in the urban landscape of contemporary Russia. By way of conclusion, I will provide two examples to explain what I have in mind.

Street mirrors, as discussed above, are designed as a means of surveillance and crime prevention, with some measure of success at least with regard to interiors: installing observation mirrors above shelves of products in stores and bookshelves in libraries has proven to sharply reduce the number of attempted thefts and vandalism.<sup>26</sup> But a recent report about a new street mirror installed in Krasnodar

speaks not of its policing potential but its magical associations. On 27 February 2008, members of the Zerkalo youth center installed a large street mirror on Karl Marx Street at one of the city's busiest bus stops, next to the *Luch* 'Ray of Light' movie theater. According to the center's director, the mirror "symbolizes the sincerity of the young generation"; it promises to give the youngsters a glimpse of their future prospects and of pathways to solving the vital problems of the day. What is more, "one of the reasons for installing it is the mirror's ability to relieve aggression and tension in the people who are waiting for a bus."<sup>27</sup> Thus, if Jameson reads the glass surfaces that are taking over modern cityscapes in terms of stirring up aggression, others see mirrors as having quite a different effect.

A feature entitled "Why We Live Here," published in *Boston Magazine* in 2002, places "The reflection of Trinity Church on the Hancock Tower" as the third item on the list. Perhaps the attraction is the way in which the reflection of the venerable church in the sleek skyscraper visually seems to convey the harmony between historical epochs epitomized in the different architectural styles, to say nothing of the functions, of the two buildings in question. An analogous example may be found in Moscow, in the Federal Arbitration Court building, completed in 2007. This building, which features a striking use of reflective surfaces, is the work of architect Vladimir Plotkin, whose other buildings likewise show his fascination with the expressive potential of mirrored walls (fig. 15). An article published by the Architectural News Agency describes how the walls of the courthouse serve as mirrors reflecting two architectural monuments nearby—the Pimen Church and a fire observation tower: "The intersection with Pimen Alley offers a remarkable vantage point that combines the view of the tower with a reflection of the church belfry. Let us note that the reflections are not there by chance; on the contrary, they were a part of the plan from the



Fig. 15. The Federal Arbitration Court building, designed by Vladimir Plotkin. Image located at [http://agency.archi.ru/news\\_current.html?nid=4132](http://agency.archi.ru/news_current.html?nid=4132). Photograph by Aleksei Naroditskii, used with permission.

start, as can be seen from the project designs” (Tarabarina). The reflected monuments coexist in harmony with the new glass building. Moreover, the building creates a new harmony between the two monuments by placing them next to each other, thanks to the visual trickery of mirrors. The very form of the courthouse building suggests certain ideas about the humanistic goals informing the work going on inside:

The main impression conveyed by the architecture of this building is that of purity and openness, permeability, lightness, and rationalism, as well as respect toward everything—toward the monuments around it and the people inside; all of this revolves around the image of the ideal court of justice, one that is humane, rational, open, around all those qualities that we have become accustomed to connecting with an open society and the European path of development... The building appears either as a reflection of the process of our country’s humanization, or—what seems more objective—as an attempt to give the process a gentle push forward through artistic means. (Tarabarina)

It is my hope that the reflections generated by mirror-buildings in contemporary Russia will create a more benevolent effect than earlier skyscrapers did—by multiplying the beauty of their surroundings and fostering flights of imagination as mirrors are wont to do—and then, perhaps, Moscow may yet emerge as the utopian glass city of the future.

#### Notes

1 Other tsars’ mirrors in pre-Petrine Russia likewise took the form of a large fan (of peacock or ostrich feathers, or a folding fan of satin or leather) with a mirror at the center. See Volkhovskoi 31.

2 For detailed descriptions of Muscovy mirrors, see Zabelin 193-95.

3 A discussion of the significance of these distinctions is found in Florenskii 92.

4 See Morozov 1004 for details on Lomonosov’s petition to the Empress.

5 The method was invented by British engineer Alastair Pilkington in 1959. See Ellis 57.

6 I am grateful to Sean Pollock for this information.

7 For a guide to this phenomenon, see Grabes. See also Wimsatt: “Works called mirrors generally aim in some way both at inclusiveness and the presentation of ideals; they are either compendiums of exemplars or compendiums of more or less corrupted entities in which exemplars are implicit” (139). For a discussion of the special significance of the “speculum genre” in the Russian context, see Chadaga 2002.

8 As a symbol, the mirror has had a range of often conflicting associations. Starting in the Middle Ages, the duality of mirror symbolism can be seen in the coexistence of the notion of Virgin Mary as the “spotless mirror” who perfectly reflects divine truth with the iconographic association of Venus with a mirror, a symbol of the search for truth but also self-absorption and sinful pride. See Goscilo in this issue.

9 Lukin actually used a French translation of Dodsley’s play, which was itself based on Thomas Randolph’s *The Conceited Peddler* (1630). See McLean.

10 The last chapter of Book I revisits the mirror motif, now on a figurative level. A series of catastrophes rains down upon the protagonist, and he declares: “My heart was akin to a mirror broken into a thousand pieces. Each of them shows part of its object, but all of them together make up a most abominable picture” (Narezhnyi 143).

11 I am grateful to Liudmila A. Aksenova, a curator at the Museum of the City of Petersburg at the Peter and Paul Fortress, for this information.

12 “Fen-shui dlia zerkala” from the website *Stroitel'stvo i nedvizhimost'*, <http://www.estate-building.ru/topics/64>.

13 On the “split personality” of reflection see Goldberg 121 and Werness 9.

14 A classic description of Russian fortune-telling with the use of mirrors is found in Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*; the tradition is also discussed in Grushko and Medvedev 168 as well as in Pendergrast 36.

15 I am grateful to Valery and Larisa Bekman for giving me insights into Dal’s lexicon and providing invaluable cultural context.

16 See the comments by contemporary designer Liliia Voskovskaia on the commercial glass website <http://b2b-glassware.ru/>. See also Pravdivtsev 382-401.

17 Only in 1835 did Julius von Leibeg invent a process of backing mirror glass with silver instead of mercury. See Turner 721.

18 The English translation here and throughout is revised. For the original, see Zamiatin 1989.

19 Collins (71) interprets I-330 as D’s *anima*, just one of the psychic aspects of D himself.

20 Natalie Kononeko Moyle cites ethnographic and linguistic data attesting to a profound dread of border-crossing in traditional Russian culture.

21 Eco also considers the mirror a channel in that it is “a material medium for the passage of information” (221), and this formulation helps to elucidate further the way in which mirrors in Russian culture function as portals to other, often fantastic, realms. See Lodge and Goscilo in this issue.

22 Translation revised; original cited in Shklovskii 62.

23 Shklovskii admonished Eisenstein for his baroque treatment of objects in his film *October*, so that he ended up depicting “an uprising of dishes” rather than the Bolshevik triumph in all its glory (qtd. in Lary 124).

24 See Grushko and Medvedev 167-68: “Mirrors in a house where there is a dead man are covered up so that his soul may not be reflected in them, and then appear there [pokazyvat’sia ottuda], scaring the living people to death.”

25 For examples of mirrors used in warfare, see Pendergrast 60 and Pravdivtsev 229-33.

26 This information is provided at the commercial glass website, <http://b2b-glassware.ru>.

27 “V tsentre Krasnoirska ustanovili ulichnoe zerkalo,” IA REGNUM K-NEWS, 2 Feb. 2008, at <http://www.knews.ru/allnews/962704>; the story is also covered at <http://regions.ru/news/cultura/2127157>.

#### Works Cited

- Armstrong, Isobel. “Transparency: Towards a Poetics of Glass in the Nineteenth Century.” *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*. Ed. Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow. London: Faber, 1996. 123-48.
- Asharina, N. A. “Russkie zavody khudozhestvennogo stekla XVII-XVIIIvv.” *Iz istorii russkoi keramiki i stekla XVII-XIX vekov: sbornik trudov*. Ed. N. A. Asharina. Moscow: Gosud. ordena Lenina Istoricheskii muzei, 1986.
- Babkhanov, S. B. *Fakely “Ognei.”* Makhachkala: Dagestanskoe knizhnoe izdvo, 1991.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. Austin: U of Texas P, 1990.
- Benjamin, Walter. “Paris: The Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1978.

- Boldyrev, A. S., ed. "Stekol'naia promyshlennost'" *Promyshlennost' stroitel'nykh materialov SSSR 1917-1967*. Moscow: Izd. literatury po stroitel'stvu, 1967.
- Bordwell, David. *The Cinema of Eisenstein*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Brodsky, Joseph. "Guide to a Renamed City." *Less than One: Selected Essays*. New York: Farrar, 1987. 69-94.
- . "In a Room and a Half." *Less than One: Selected Essays*. New York: Farrar, 1987. 447-501.
- Chadaga, Julia Bekman. "Mirror Writing: The Literary Traces of the *Zertsalo*." *The Russian Review* 61 (Jan. 2002): 73-93.
- Chernyshevskii, N. G. *Chto delat'?: Iz rasskazov o novykh liudiakh*. Ed. T. I. Ornatskaia and S. A. Reiser. Leningrad: Nauka, 1975.
- Collins, Christopher. "Zamyatin's *We* as Myth." *Zamyatin's We: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Gary Kern. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988.
- Colton, Timothy J. *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1995.
- Dal', Vladimir. *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo russkogo iazyka*, 6th edition, vol. 1. Moscow: Gos. izd-vo inostrannykh i natsional'nykh slovarei, 1955. 680-81.
- Dodsley, Robert. *The Toy-Shop* (1735). Introd. Harry N. Solomon. Augustan Reprint Society 218-19. Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, U of California P, 1983.
- Eco, Umberto. "Mirrors." *Iconicity: Essays on the Nature of Culture. Festschrift for Thomas A. Sebeok on His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*. Ed. Paul Bouissac, Michael Herzfeld, and Roland Posner. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1986.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. *Selected Works IV. Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs*. Ed. Richard Taylor, trans. William Powell. London: BFI, 1995.
- . Dir. *Strike* [video]. Image Entertainment, 2000.
- Ellis, William S. *Glass: From the First Mirror to Fiber Optics, the Story of the Substance that Changed the World*. New York: Avon, 1998.
- Florenskii, P. A. *Iconostasis*. Trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny" (1919) in *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Frolova, Elena. "Ne ochen' prozrachnaia istoriia." *Material* 2, 2002. Web. 24

- Mar. 2004.
- Goldberg, Benjamin. *The Mirror and Man*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1985.
- Grabes, Herbert. *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*. Trans. Gordon Collier. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Grushko, Elena and Iurii Medvedev. *Slovar' russkikh sueverii, zaklinanii, primet i poverii*. Nizhnii Novgorod: Russkii kupets, 1995.
- Hellie, Richard. *The Economy and Material Culture of Russia, 1600-1725*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999. 221.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- Kamenskii, V. V. *Zhizn' s Maiakovskim*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1974.
- Kohl, J. G. *Russia and the Russians in 1842*. Vol. 2. London: Henry Colburn, 1842.
- Kononeko Moyle, Natalie. "Spacey Soviets and the Russian Attitude toward Territorial Passage." *New York Folklore* 7.1&2 (1981): 83-96.
- Kotyrev, Andrei. *Mavzolei V. I. Lenina: proektirovanie i stroitel'stvo*. Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1971.
- Kuleshov N. and A. Pozdnev. *Vysotnye zdaniia Moskvy*. Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1954.
- Lary, Nikita. "Viktor Shklovsky: The Good and Awkward Friend." *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration*. Ed. Al LaValley and Barry Scherr. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001. 121-28.
- Leonov, A. I., ed. *Russkoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo. 18-i vek*. Vol. 2. Moscow: Izd. Akademii Khudozhestv, 1963.
- Levinson E. A. et al. *Khudozhestvennoe steklo i ego primemenie v arkhitekture*. Leningrad: Gosud. izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu i arkhitekture, 1953.
- Leyda, Jay and Zina Voynow. *Eisenstein at Work*. New York: Pantheon, 1982.
- Lomonosov, M. V. *Stikhotvoreniia*. Biblioteka poeta, Malaia Seriia, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. A. Morozov. Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1954.
- Lukin, V. I. *Shchepetil'nik. Russkaia komediia i komicheskaia opera XVIII veka*. Ed. P. N. Berkov. Moscow-Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1950.
- McLean, Hugh. "The Adventures of an English Comedy in Eighteenth-Century

- Russia: Dodsley's *Toy Shop* and Lukin's *Ščepetil'nik*." *American Contributions to the Fifth International Congress of Slavists, Sofia, September 1963*. The Hague: Mouton, 1963.
- Morozov, Aleksandr. Commentary to "Pis'mo o pol'ze stekla" by M. V. Lomonosov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. Vol. 8. Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1959.
- Narezhnyi, V. T. *Rossiiskii Zhilblaz, ili Pokhozhdeniia kniazia Gavrily Simonovicha Chistiakova in Izbrannye sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*. Vol. I. Moscow: Khudlit, 1956.
- Olesha, Iurii. *Zavist'. Ni dnia bez strochki*. Minsk: BGU im. V. I. Lenina, 1982.
- Papernyi, Vladimir. *Kul'tura "Dva"*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985.
- Pendergrast, Mark. *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*. New York: Basic, 2003.
- Pravditsev, Vitalii. *Eti zagadochnye zerkala... Vzaimodeistvie cheloveka s zerkalami*. Moscow: Izd. "RITs MDK," 2002.
- "Protestuia ot imeni millionov trudiashchikhsia SSSR, krest'ianin Nikitin vystrelil v sarkofag s telom Lenina, a zatem ubil sebia." *Fakty i kommentarii*. 22 Oct. 1999. Web. 27 Apr. 2000.
- Pyliaev, M. I. *Zabytoe proshloe okrestnostei Peterburga*. St. Petersburg: Izd. A.S. Suvorina, 1889.
- Scheerbart, Paul. *Glass Architecture*. Trans. James Palmes, ed. Dennis Sharp. New York: Praeger, 1972.
- Semenov, Dmitrii. "Etazhi so znakom minus." *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 12 Oct. 1991.
- . "Pervyi sovetskii neboskreb," *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 18 May 1991.
- . "Taina zheleznoi dveri," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 22 July 2004.
- Shklovskii, Viktor. *Eizenshtein*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973.
- Solov'ev, S. M. *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen v piatnadsati knigakh*, Book VIII. Moscow: Izd. Sotsial'no-Ekonomicheskoi literatury, 1962.
- "Steklo v sovremennoi arkhitekture," *Sovremennaia arkhitektura* 3 (1926).
- Tarabarina, Iuliia. "Zdanie Federal'nogo Arbitrazhnogo suda Moskovskogo okruga." *Agentstvo Arkhitekturnykh Novostei*. 30 July 2007. Web. 15 Nov. 2007.
- Tarkhanov, Alexei and Sergei Kavtaradze. *Architecture of the Stalin Era*. New York: Rizzoli International, 1992.

- Thacker, Christopher. *The Wildness Pleases: The Origins of Romanticism*. New York: St. Martin's, 1983.
- Torti, Anna. *The Glass of Form: Mirroring Structures from Chaucer to Skelton*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991.
- Tsvian, Yuri. Audio commentary for *Strike*, dir. Sergei Eisenstein, Image Entertainment, 2000.
- Turner, Jane, ed. *Dictionary of Art*. New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996.
- Volkhovskoi, M. G., comp. *Domashnii byt russkikh tsarei v XVI-XVII vv. po Zabelinu, Kliuchevskomu, Karnovichu i drugim* (1904). Moscow: Panorama, 1992.
- Voronov, N. V. and M. M. Dubova. *Nevskii khrustal': ocherki osnovnykh etapov razvitiia*. Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1984.
- Werness, Hope B. *The Symbolism of Mirrors in Art from Ancient Times to the Present*. Lewiston: Mellen, 1999.
- Wimsatt, James I. *Allegory and Mirror: Tradition and Structure in Middle English Literature*. New York: Pegasus, 1970.
- Zabelin, I. E. *Domashnii byt russkikh tsarei v XVI i XVII stoletiiakh*. Book I. Moscow: Kniga, 1990.
- Zamiatin, Evgenii. *My* in *Izbrannoe*. Moscow: Pravda, 1989.
- Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Trans. Mirra Ginsburg. New York: Eos, 1999.