

**“Unmisted By Love or Dislike”¹: Using the Mirror
to Understand and Practice the Alexander Technique**

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Introduction: On Stating the Obvious

A mirror reflection can be seen but not felt, which makes its use particularly appropriate for a technique that regards feeling as illusory. In “*The Use of the Self*,”² F.M. Alexander describes how observing himself with mirrors helped him to literally see a “means whereby faulty conditions of use in the human organism could be improved.” In the introduction to “*The Use of the Self*,” John Dewey deemed Alexander’s research to be wholly scientific and commended him for creating “a physiology of the living organism” in contrast to the anatomist’s study of “dead things under unusual and artificial conditions”³. Dewey praised Alexander for studying his own self, as he considered the “direct and intimate confirmation” of first-hand knowledge to be the most significant type of learning.

With regard to the concept of first-hand knowledge, Patrick Macdonald quotes his childhood boxing teacher: “I can teach you to do this, but I can’t learn you. You will have to learn yourself.”⁴ I am fortunate to have excellent teachers who encourage me to learn for myself. Using the mirror for this purpose would seem to be common sense, yet as with many things that we take for granted, it is worthwhile to pause and consider how to make the most of it.

In the following, I examine the mirror as a tool for learning and teaching the Alexander Technique. Used properly, the mirror can provide insight to the central principles of the technique, verification of its theory, and feedback for practicing it.

Self Recognition and Consciousness:

He who cannot see himself might as well not exist.

– Balthazar Gracian (1584-1658)

Recognizing one’s own reflection in the mirror requires self awareness. Studies have shown that only at about twenty months do infants show signs of self

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recognition when looking at their reflection, which is about the same age that they begin to use the words “I,” “me” and “mine.”⁵ Lack of such recognition at a later age is symptomatic of mental or physical disorders such as autism, schizophrenia or Alzheimer’s disease.⁶ The self awareness indicated by reflection recognition may be considered a sign of satisfactory development and health. It is also regarded as a measure of intelligence by researchers who have observed the ability of certain mammals to recognize themselves and even learn reversed image translation.⁷

Most of us use mirrors on a daily basis; in dressing to evaluate the appropriateness of our physical appearance, in grooming to avoid injury with sharp razors or scissors, in driving to synchronize ourselves with traffic, in specialized activities such as exercise or performing arts to improve our form. We are quite accustomed to employing mirrors when attentiveness is specifically called for, but it is when we use a mirror to observe things that don’t directly demand our attention (such as raising a glass to our mouth, sitting on a chair, or even observing the manner in which we peer at a mirror) that we can become conscious of things that we are ignorant of.

Heightened awareness is not always a necessary function, and though not enough in itself to affect change, it is a beneficial step towards furthering our development, health, and in my opinion, even intelligence.

Habit and the Principle of Unreliable Sensory Appreciation:

He who sees himself in a mirror sees himself well, he who sees himself well knows himself well, he who knows himself well takes little pride in himself.

Pierre Gringore (1525)

Two of Alexander’s important discoveries resulted from his use of the mirror. After traditional medical treatment failed to solve his recurrent voice problems, Alexander decided to try and find a solution himself. He began his investigation with

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the presumption that he was ‘doing’ something to cause the hoarseness he experienced when reciting. This idea in itself was quite novel: that one might be responsible for one’s physical condition rather than regarding the condition as a circumstantial affliction. His doctor supported Alexander’s hypothesis but was unable to tell him what he was doing wrong. Looking in the mirror seemed to be the next logical step. Following a long process of observing and experimenting, he noticed a difference in his overt physical behavior between speaking and reciting.

Specifically, he saw that he tended to pull his head back, depress his larynx and suck in breath through his mouth each time he began to recite. He also noticed that those same tendencies occurred during ordinary speech, but to a lesser degree. He realized that his particular physical behavior was a constant pattern, a habit, and, that it was unconscious. It was not until he observed these habits during the exaggerated actions in his way of reciting, that he was able to see them during his normal way of speaking.

Alexander began to experiment with preventing the habits that interfered with his voice production, and with employing what he considered to be beneficial physical behavior (putting his head forward and up) for the purpose of improving his use and functioning. He had been so confident that he would be able to put into practice any idea that he thought desirable that he neglected to look in the mirror to confirm that he was acting as planned. To his dismay, he soon found that this line of experimenting which he believed combined ‘preventing’ (the pulling, sucking and depressing) and ‘doing’ (putting his head forward and up,) was not providing the expected improvement of his vocal capacity.

Reassessing the situation with the aid of the mirror once again, he came upon the second important discovery. Not only was he not doing what he had planned to do, he was doing the opposite of what he thought he was doing. Eventually, Alexander realized that the discrepancy between what he *felt* and what he *saw* was caused by what he called ‘*unreliable sensory appreciation.*’

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Alexander was convinced that “if it is possible for feeling to become untrustworthy as a means of direction, it should also be possible to make it trustworthy again.”⁸ To this end, he employed mirrors to provide the necessary feedback for re-evaluating his feelings, and synchronizing his feelings with his observations. Throughout the long process of developing inhibition and the directions for the primary control he used a mirror to appraise his progress.

Perceiving Ourselves as Psycho-Physical Mechanisms:

Over the course of history, humankind has had an ambivalent relationship with its own reflection. The mirror has at times been regarded as a marvelous device for knowing oneself, used for the pursuit of science, beauty and divine truth. At other times, it has been perceived as an evil apparatus used for deception, debauchery and malevolence. The positive view of the mirror has been held by cultures that see body and mind as an inseparable unity meant to please the gods, or represent a reflection of god’s image. The negative view has been taken by cultures that regard the body as inferior, idealized the intellect and advocated the notion of the mind’s ability to transcend the body.

Recently, a medical application of mirror work in the treatment of amputees demonstrates that it is precisely the mirrors ability to deceive that can help the mind to transcend the body. Neurologists at Walter Reed Army Medical Center are using mirror treatment to help amputees suffering from phantom limb pain syndrome.⁹ Phantom limb pain is an extreme example of the mind failing to inform the body; your mind tells you that the limb is gone, but the brain won’t listen. Mirror treatment has the patient sitting on a flat surface with a six foot mirror placed lengthwise to reflect the remaining limb. As the patient moves the limb, the reflection creates the illusion of two limbs moving together. Though scientists can not completely explain what happens, it seems that proprioceptive neurons continue to send signals along pathways that did not get shut down with the amputation. The false image of the

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moving limb somehow tricks the brain into coordinating mismatched visual and proprioceptive information. Using mirrors to change neurological pain pathways appears to be more effective than subduing the pain with medication.

In the description detailed in “Evolution of a Technique,”¹⁰ Alexander admits that prior to his “practical experimentation upon the living human being,” (which initially consisted of observing himself in the mirror) he believed the body and mind to be separate parts of the same organism and that human shortcomings could be classified as either mental or physical, and dealt with accordingly. Subsequent to his discoveries, he came to accept “the theory of the unity of mental and physical processes in human activity.” It is valid to propose that the act of observing himself in a mirror contributed to Alexander’s realization that body and mind function as a unified mechanism. Though he didn’t have the neurological research to back it, I imagine that noticing how proprioception can be both mislead and trained showed him that mind and body inform each other in far more complex ways than separation allows for.

Trusting Reason

Alexander continued to come face to face with the force of habit: “There was no question about this. I could see it actually happening in the mirror.”¹¹ Yet further along, as he describes the evolution of his technique, he makes no more direct references to the mirror. On the occasions when he wrote: “... I came to see that..,” “It became apparent that..,” etc. we cannot be sure whether he used the mirror or some other means (the sound of his voice) to assess his use and functioning. As a matter of fact, the word mirror does not appear as a term in the indices of any of his books, nor in any other of his illustrations of the technique. Once the mirror had shown him that what “felt right” or familiar was actually wrong, Alexander was able, in effect, to throw away the ladder. By refusing to revert to what ‘felt right’ (inhibition) and putting complete trust in his thought process (direction) even though

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it felt wrong, he was able to substitute his misuse with good use. The evidence of the improvement gained by inhibiting and directing did not require visual confirmation. In fact, it is the nature of *indirect procedures* to bring about change in the whole person including a wide range of attributes that are not immediately visible such as the quality of one's voice, mental attitude, temperament, blood pressure and digestion to name a few.

As Walter Carrington states in *'The Act of Living'*: "Alexander had moved from using the mirrors and the visual cues to being able to rectify his sensory thinking. He was able to exercise better sensory judgment."¹² Like Alexander, we will be able to exercise better sensory judgment by having "the visual cues" firmly imprinted in our memory. In his book *'Personally Speaking,'* Carrington writes "If you've been working in front of a mirror, then it is perfectly legitimate to visualize what you've seen in the mirror – you can remember in your mind's eye what it was like- and you can order and direct accordingly."¹³ Unreliable sensory appreciation proves the converse to be true – that if you have not been working in front of a mirror, then your mind's eye is much more likely to conform with what 'feels right.' More often than not, your imagination is apt to be misled by such feelings; most of us have had the experience of being surprised by our own reflection.

The Use of the Reflection:

And since you know you cannot see yourself

So well as by reflection, I your glass

Will modestly discover to yourself

That of yourself which you yet know not of.

-William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2

What then constitutes 'working' in front of the mirror? How does it differ from the ordinary, daily use in which people of all ages, sexes and occupations

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engage? A distinction should be made between looking in the mirror and ‘mirror-work’. Looking in the mirror will always elicit a subjective value judgment (such as attractive or unattractive) that may trigger a habitual reaction (such as cringing or a satisfactory nod). It is a good idea to calmly check these responses, but it is important to recognize that this is just an application of the technique for looking at the mirror, comparable to applying the technique to similarly self-confronting situations such as looking at photographs of one self or hearing a recording of one’s voice.

Mirror-work allows for objective judgment calls. Walter Carrington suggests that one ought “to try to see not what you are doing right, but to try and see what you are doing wrong.”¹⁴ What precisely constitutes ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (i.e. *up* or *down*, *fixed* or *free*....) should be a question that we continually examine, not shy away from. When we acknowledge the distinction between subjective and objective judgment calls, we can decide to temporarily disregard our feelings and just observe our primary control. We can take stock of stability, equanimity and availability to movement by assessing bearing, tone, and movement initiation.

In ‘*The Act of Living*’ Carrington writes that “when he [Alexander] used the words forward and up, he was describing what he saw taking place in the mirror. Now generations of pupils have come along and they’ve never actually seen that. They’ve felt it but they haven’t seen it.”¹⁵ He goes on to explain that this is due to the Technique having evolved to become a sensory technique in which learning is the result of hands-on guided experience rather than visual observation, but that it is still very helpful to use the mirrors to experiment. In other words, though it is possible to improve one’s sensory appreciation by the experience provided by a teacher, seeing for one’s self (in so far as one is able to see) can provide the ‘direct and intimate confirmation’ so lauded by Dewey.

Seeing and Directing:

“Those who keep on repeating ‘Yes, yes. I see’, hardly ever do”

- Patrick Macdonald¹⁶

Selective attention is recognized as necessary to normal functioning yet so many people have an odd propensity for missing both the obvious and the significant details of life. In regard to selective vision, we tend to notice a single gray hair or the faintest wrinkle, yet miss the grossest indications of use. The Alexander Technique teaches us what to look for and cultivates keen observation skills which allow us to notice even subtle habits of use. If we are able to use the mirror to correlate what we feel with what we see, then the mirror is serving us the same purpose that it served Alexander. Of course it is a lot less time consuming to allow a teacher to override our habits and give us a direct experience of head-led movement, but if we aspire to learn for ourselves, not to mention teach others, we must be able to expose our habits on our own.

In his books, Alexander did not specifically recommend employing the mirror for the practice of directing. That is not to say that we can not or should not. There are several advantages to using the mirror while teaching and learning.

Carrington suggests that seeing the evidence of our directing-work enables us to direct rationally instead of by feeling. In the book *‘Personally Speaking’* he notes [to Sean Carey] “If you are standing in front of a mirror and directing your head, you can see whether you’re pulling it back or not. You don’t need to put a hand up to feel it – feeling doesn’t even come into it. It’s what you see that counts.”¹⁷ Several pages later, he continues, “As you direct the mirror image you’re not paying attention to the feeling – you’re certainly not directing the mirror image by feeling – even though feeling is still there and being registered.”¹⁸ I find that concept very appealing – the idea that we can dissociate ourselves from our reflection. It allows us momentarily to be detached from emotions and judgments and instead focus on the head-neck-back

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relationship and other overt indices of use. The notion of such dissociation is not as crazy as it may sound. Anyone who uses a mirror professionally for the development of a skill works that way. Dancers and actors look in the mirror to see themselves through their audience's eyes, martial artists to see themselves through their opponent's eyes, the self-portrait painter to see through the draftsman's eye. An Alexander teacher may look in the mirror to see herself through, well, an Alexander teacher's eye.

In her book *'The Mirror – a History,'* Sabine Melchior Bonnet writes that the mirror provides “power and dissatisfaction: for someone who looks at himself can never contemplate himself as pure spectacle. He is at once subject and object, judge and plaintiff, victim and executioner, torn between what he is and what he knows.”¹⁹ Poetic as that is, it is not entirely true in our case. While we may not be able to see ourselves as pure spectacle, we are able through dissociation to see ourselves at once as cause and effect, student and teacher, actor/action and director/direction. We can look in the mirror without being torn between what we are and what we know because the Alexander Technique teaches us to assume responsibility for what we are by becoming conscious of our reactions and controlling them in a constructive manner.

Smoke and Mirrors, Tricks and Traps:

On a practical level, a mirror can do two very useful things for teachers of the Technique. First, it expands our field of vision. Rather than having to step back from our work like a painter from her canvas, the mirror affords a depth of view twice our distance from it. This is particularly useful when working with a student. If the teacher wishes to see the entire student and have hands on at the same time, then a well positioned mirror will literally broaden the teacher's perspective. Multiple mirrors can expand our view to side and rear views that are otherwise out of sight, or visible only by twisting and craning. (Carrington describes such a mirror set up in the

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little back teaching room of Ashley place.)²⁰ Second, a mirror can keep us humble by subjecting our sensory perception to an astute reality check. It is an objective reference point that we cannot afford to neglect. Alexander emphasized that point by putting the following paragraph in italics:

*I break my story here to draw attention to a very curious fact, even though it tells against myself. My reader will remember that in my earlier experiments, when I wished to make certain of what I was doing with myself in the familiar act of reciting, I had derived invaluable help from the use of a mirror. Despite this past experience and the knowledge that I had gained from it, I now set out on an experiment which brought into play a new use of certain parts and involved sensory experiences that were totally unfamiliar, without its even occurring to me that for this purpose I should need the help of the mirror more than ever.*²¹

We may be able to maintain good use without constant monitoring, yet when we endeavor to subject our senses to the unfamiliar experience of a new use, it is useful to remember that we cannot rely on our sensory appreciation any more than Alexander could. We should seek feedback from a teacher or a mirror, preferably both, as they reinforce and corroborate one another. If we neglect mirror-work, we may also miss the opportunity to rejoice when we learn something new. We may be just as unaware of good use as we are of bad use. Seeing oneself in the mirror standing tall and spacious can be as surprising as it is gratifying.

To use the mirror to our best advantage, we must be prepared to recognize its limitations and the risks involved. There are both subjective and objective watch points to consider.

From an objective viewpoint, we can be confused by the left-right reversal phenomenon. Anyone who has ever tried to cut her own hair has surely experienced this. This can also be disconcerting when using verbal directions in conjunction with the mirror. If, for instance, we say “move the left hand” – the reflected image moves its right hand. It can be helpful to think of left-right reversal as north-south axial

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rotation instead.²² In this instance, we are facing north and the reflection is facing south, but when we move the west hand, the reflection too moves its west hand.

Additionally, we should be mindful of our use in the actual activity of looking in the mirror. Mirrors should be placed advantageously so that we need not pull our heads back, shorten or narrow our backs or lose our balance to get a proper view. A few practical suggestions are offered at the end of this paper.

On a subjective level, the mirror is such a tremendous stimulus that it has become a metaphor for both integrity and vanity. We are easily distracted by irrelevant particulars and become preoccupied with evaluating our appearance. Quite often, we have a strong judgmental reaction. If we do notice manifestations of misuse, the temptation to directly correct them can be overwhelming. In fact, this urge can be so strong at times that it may be preferable not to use a mirror at all.

Patience and knowing what to look for are paramount. A genuine understanding of the primary control and basic directions are required to make sense of what you see. As Pedro De Alcantara put it in his book *'Indirect Procedures'*: "Alexander was a man of insight, perseverance, imagination and humor. Without all these attributes, you risk looking at a mirror without finding out anything about what you are actually doing."²³

Finally, it is wise to remember that the road to misuse can be paved with the best intentions. Faulty sensory appreciation is a constant condition, and using a mirror does not guarantee accurate observation or interpretation.

Some Practical Suggestions for Using the Mirror:

If we consider life without the mirror, we are only considering it half-way.

- David Hockney

1. Approach mirror-work with a positive attitude and a modicum of humor. Rather than dreading the encounter with a less-than-perfect reflection, view it as a learning opportunity.

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2. Learn to dissociate and enjoy the fantasy of being in two places at once. The looking glass enables us to be both present and elsewhere, at least metaphorically.

3. Choose an advantageous view by experimenting with different distances and angles. Make a point of moving the mirror or yourself to see what works best for working alone, with a partner or with a student. For example, when working with a student, placing the chair at a forty-degree angle away from the mirror allows the teacher to see her own front and the back of the student without distracting the student. A forty-five-degree angle towards the mirror allows both the teacher and the student to see the mirror, but the student will need to slightly turn her head. A ninety-degree angle will have the student obstructing the teachers view and will require some side stepping by the teacher to gain a view. A straight-on view allows the student a full view while the teacher may gain a view by turning her head. Different positions will be better for different situations.

4. When using multiple mirrors, angle them to gain a view of your front and your profile. The profile image will appear to move in the opposite direction of the front image. Spend a little time observing this phenomenon so that it does not surprise you each time you move.

5. When guiding a student and watching the mirror simultaneously, consider the following warning from the *"National Motorist's Association's Guide to State and Provincial Traffic Laws"*:

Most of us have dealt with blind spots by turning our head for a quick check. This isn't generally a problem in terms of missing something ahead; however, there can be a dangerous side effect. Unless you've worked to control it, your arms will move in the direction that your eyes are looking

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causing the steering wheel to turn. With well-positioned mirrors, your head won't have to turn as far to check any remaining blind spots.

6. Make the distinction between subjective and objective value judgments regarding your appearance. Details that elicit subjective value judgments (such as an open button or a rogue lock of hair) should be consciously addressed with good use, or consciously ignored. Observed patterns of misuse (such as shortening the lower back or narrowing the shoulders) should be addressed with inhibition.

7. When observing yourself, acknowledge the subtle movement caused by breathing. Don't try to stand completely still lest you forget to breath.

Conclusion

If we hope to achieve a measure of independence in the art of changing, then reliable feedback from sources other than a teacher should be actively sought after. Trustworthiness can be restored to feeling as a means of direction only by countering faulty sensory appreciation with a willingness to repeatedly be proven wrong. Being proven wrong by the mirror can be uncomfortably humbling yet we should embrace it never-the-less. Emotional discomfort is often a greater hurdle than difficult physical or mental challenges. As a source of feedback, the mirror excels on the following counts:

- ❖ Instant, real-time information on both the good and the bad enables us to stop and change course instead of backtracking or starting over.
- ❖ We may use it at our own convenience in terms of both time and presence of mind.
- ❖ It has no ulterior motives, moments of impaired judgment or distraction, nor will it make forgiving concessions.²⁴

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It is our job to ensure that we are interpreting and processing the visual feedback accurately and effectively. To this end it is a good idea occasionally to have a partner when using the mirror.

I believe that mirror-work is an activity that should be studied and practiced with a methodological approach. We learn monkey, lunge, whispered “ah”, and hands on the back of the chair. Learning to use a mirror can be just as empowering and habit-revealing. Without suggesting that we use a mirror any more than Alexander did, we would be wise not to use it any less. Though he devised a method to teach his technique, even the best of teachers can only teach a student to learn for her own self.

Despite the advantages afforded by using the mirror, the Alexander Technique would have little practical value if we had to constantly rely on it. It is common practice for telemarketers to have special mirrors fitted to their computer screens to remind them to ‘smile while you dial’, thus increasing the success of their phone solicitations.²⁵ Thankfully, the Alexander Technique teaches us how to exercise unaided sensory judgment that allows at least relative improvement. If I had to resort to constant self monitoring like a telemarketer does, I am quite sure that sooner or later I would react as Martin Sheen did in the opening scene of Francis Ford Coppola’s film ‘Apocalypse Now’. (In this famous scene, Sheen’s character Captain Willard, deranged by the horrors of war, attacks his own reflection, smashing the mirror with his bare fist. This is an example the mirror’s cultural role as a metaphor for brutal honesty, hyper awareness, and unforgiving truth.)

My parents tell me that as a child I had a friend in the mirror. Schedules had to accommodate enough time for greeting this friend upon waking and returning home, for farewells at bedtime, and before leaving the house. It may seem peculiar as grownups to arrange a play-date with our own reflection, but in the spirit of exploration and wonder – who cares what Nurse Ratched thinks?²⁶

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- ¹ Sylvia Plath, "Mirror," *True and False: Poems* (Everyman's Library, 1998), 122.
- ² F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, in *The Books of F. Mathias Alexander* (New York: IRDEAT 1997) Chapter 1.
- ³ John Dewey, *Ibid*, Introduction.
- ⁴ Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, (Brighton: Rahula Books, 1989), 11.
- ⁵ Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror, A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 365.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 358-361.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 362-364.
- ⁸ F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* *Ibid*, 420.
- ⁹ Sandra Young, "For amputees, an unlikely painkiller: mirrors" CNN March 19th, 2008 <http://www.cnn.com/2008/HEALTH/03/19/mirror.therapy/index.html>
- ¹⁰ Alexander, *The Use of the Self* *Ibid*.
- ¹¹ F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, *Ibid*, 423.
- ¹² Walter Carrington, *The Act of Living*, (San Francisco: Mornam Time Press, 1999), 65.
- ¹³ Walter Carrington and Sean Carey, *Personally Speaking* (London: Mouritz, 2001), 129.
- ¹⁴ Walter Carrington, *The Act of Living*, (San Francisco: Mornam Time Press, 1999), 65.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*. 64.
- ¹⁶ Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, (Brighton: Rahula Books, 1989), 10.
- ¹⁷ Walter Carrington and Sean Carey, *Personally Speaking* 111.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*. 123-124.
- ¹⁹ Sabine Melchior Bonnet, *The Mirror – A History*, trans. K. H. Jewett (New York: Routledge 2001), 271.
- ²⁰ Walter Carrington, *The Act of Living*, (San Francisco: Mornam Time Press, 1999), 61.
- ²¹ Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 417.
- ²² For a wider discussion of the mirror reversal puzzle, see: Mark Pendergrast, "Mirror Mirror, A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection" (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 353-355.
- ²³ Pedro De Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 165.
- ²⁴ I am grateful to David Moore for his article "On Feedback" which appears at <http://www.alexanderschool.edu.au/ATarticles.html>
- ²⁵ Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror, A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 362.
- ²⁶ The reference is to the antagonistic nurse responsible for the psychiatric ward in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, (New York, Viking Press, 1962).