

## Session: Light and (IN)Sight: Reflections on Mirrors and Other Media

*Mirrored Realities- True or False? Questioning Van Eyck, Velasquez and Manet.*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper surveys three artists who grappled so expertly with some of the tensions between paintings and mirrors that their work continues to excite, baffle and puzzle viewers even today. They are Jan van Eyck (the Arnolfini Double Portrait), Diego Velázquez (Las Meninas) and Edouard Manet (Bar at the Folies Bergre). Each artist provides a compositional puzzle engaging us in a dialectic between the painter's illusion of internal space, and the mirror, a flat surface only capable of reflecting that which is separate from its surface. The dialectic between the painter's illusion of space and that of the mirror emerges in our minds when we discover the discrepancies between the order of the paintings internal space, its relationship to the viewer's presumed focal position and the conflict with mirror's reflected image of external space. Working from this conflict we will contend that each artist constructs a conundrum; each playing deliciously off the viewer's perceptions and their initial presumption of the painting's "objectivity."

*It's All Done with Mirrors: Ether Theory from Bronte to Woolf*

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### **Abstract:**

Light, in the mid-19th century, was a wave, moving through an invisible medium, reflecting, refracting, absorbing, connecting us with sight and insight to the world around us. By the early 20th century, light had taken on a dualistic character: traveling in packets or quanta through a medium which was no medium at all, light had become a wave-particle, and wave, now decidedly probabilistic, made up of all matter.

This same period witnessed a rich proliferation within British women's fiction of the trope of the mirror - a trope that could not fail to reflect shifting popular physical understandings of the nature of light. This work will explore the interaction of light theory and the literary mirror focusing on two key figures: Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf. How, for example, does the proliferation of mirrors in *Jane Eyre*, as well as the structural mirroring effected via the doppelgänger, reveal an investment in continuity and media, fluids and mechanism characteristic of 19th-century physical theory? How does the mirror reshape itself in *The Waves*, *The Voyage Out*, and *The Lady in the Looking Glass* under the influence of quantum-mechanical and relativistic models of light, irremovably uncertain and observer dependent? How does the literary mirror reflect the notion that the behavior of nature itself depends critically on who is looking?