

TODAY



Mirror, mirror: True Mirror—created, built by hand and supported by John Walter with help from his sister, Catherine Walters—lets you and all your faces see reversed, but as others see you.

Here's Looking At You

From John Walter's perspective, too many of us have our self-image backward. He hopes his 'True Mirror' will fix that.

By RICHARD O'MARA : SUN STAFF

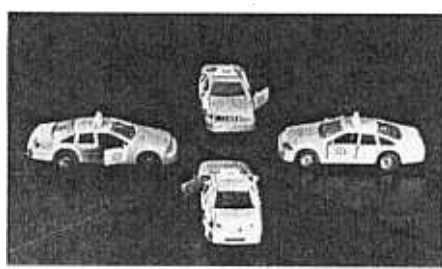
NEW YORK — Do you know who you are? What you really look like? Does your mirror tell the truth?

Of course it doesn't. It conceals things by distorting them. Hold a newspaper up to a mirror. Can you read it? Not unless you can read backward.

Hold up your watch. Can you tell the time? Not unless your eyes and mind can effortlessly reverse the numbers to counter the mirror's effect. Mirrors do elfin things like this. They obscure the plain, encode the clear.

Most people don't think about it much. John Walter does.

Walter is a thin man with wakeful eyes and a quiet voice full of patience. For about 20 years now he has been preoccupied with the effects common mirrors have on people's sense of self-identity. It



Road block: A miniature yellow taxi gets the True Mirror treatment — it's reflected in two mirrors joined in a box at a 90-degree angle.

has encouraged him to formulate some eccentric theories — one about what your hair part means — and to invent a device to counter the mendacity of mirrors.

He calls his invention the "True Mirror." Not only does his mirror reflect back a page of text that is perfectly intelligible, it [See Mirror, 5E]

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introduces you to someone you rarely encounter: yourself. It's not the self you shave every morning, or apply makeup to. It's the self everybody else sees. It is the face your wife kisses, your girlfriend slaps, the face you must, at some point in your life, turn to the music.

Mirror, mirror

That there is a difference between your mirror image and the real you may be something you are already aware of. Maybe you don't care. After all, your real image is knowable. It is revealed in photographs or on video. But for most people, it is the mirror that tells them each day who they are, what they look like. And it lies to them.

Walter is a 39-year-old New Yorker, a computer scientist with a degree in physics who does consulting work. In his spare time he assembles the True Mirrors by hand. He and his 34-year-old sister, Catherine, a sometime movie actress who studied anthropology, operate out of a minute, dull apartment in the warren of the financial district in lower Manhattan. Currently they are looking for a storefront to open a shop; they are working with a New Jersey plastics company to find a way to industrialize production of their product.

They seem a very contemporary pair, bright and attractive, manifestly levelheaded — except, perhaps, for that dubious business about the hair part.

But there is nothing dubious about the True Mirror, which is really two mirrors joined in a box at a perfect 90-degree angle. When one looks into the box, the reflected image is not only true, but three-dimensional.

The Walters are convinced their device is the first perfect realization of an idea that has been around for some time, frequently patented but never produced without flaws. John Walter discovered the first patent for the idea when he went to patent his own device, about seven years ago. It had been registered by a Catholic priest named John Joseph Hooker, who lived in Derby, England. Hooker intended to create "certain and useful Mirrors for Obtaining True or Positive Reflections." His patent was recorded Sept. 27, 1887.

But the Walters found no evidence that Hooker ever built his mirror. Nor have they seen any products that might have flowed from the 15 other patents for the device that have been registered over the years. Whatever, the idea is now in the public domain, and what the Walters' patent is for is the trademark name, True Mirror.

John Walter says he made about a hundred variations of the True Mirror before he got it right. The problem was a vexing seam in the center of the image, where the two mirrors come together. He eradicated this by using high-quality optical glass, and placing the reflective material on the front of the glass instead of the back, where it is on conventional mirrors.

The Walters have been selling True Mirrors for about six years, by word of mouth mainly. Brian Connolly, a New Yorker, who publishes a magazine called *Natural Health and Fitness*, bought one and uses it for introspection. "I look into it for five or 10 minutes three or four times a week," he said. "It reveals parts of me I'm very unfamiliar with."

Mixed reactions

So far the Walters' marketing plan has been unaggressive. Mainly they display their mirror at street fairs. They have drawn interesting reactions.

"Some people love it. Some people hate it. Some people have even run away screaming," said

John Walter. "Then there were people who said they didn't see any difference."

And to a few come painful moments of self-recognition.

Walter recalls a movie actress who took one look into the True Mirror and exclaimed that she finally understood why she was always getting cast in roles portraying "tough, hard-bolled women." Before that moment, she said, she never could understand why people would see her that way.

To both John and Catherine Walters, the True Mirror is more than a device that might make money (which it may if they succeed in automating production and bring the price down from the \$200 to \$300 to somewhere near \$70 for the small one. There are no plans for the moment to automate production of the larger mirror, which reflects the image from head to waist. Whatever the price, it is, to the Walters, a machine capable of healing a stymied psyche by correcting a flawed self-perception. It promises restored self-confidence, they believe.

And some of it, at least, has to do with the way a person divides the hair on his head.

Skepticism about this is certainly permissible, though it is probably inadvisable to laugh out loud. John Walter is obviously balanced and well-integrated, not the sort easily led by fanciful notions. His training in physics and computer science inclines him to rational, analytical thought.

The flawed part

Walter's youth was none too happy, he admits. He was not shunned, but neither was he widely popular. "I had three or four friends to my name," he recalls. "I was leaning toward being a nerd. I was very introverted, spent lot of time by myself as opposed to being out and about."

He couldn't figure out what the problem was. He was amiable, good-looking. His mirror told him that.

Then one day, while looking in that mirror he realized that he parted his hair differently from most others. He parted on the right. Nearly everybody else parted on the left — where the flat, reversing mirror showed his part to be.

Not knowing really why — maybe he felt he might do better socially if he conformed — he joined the majority and began parting his hair on the left. Life changed.

"I began having a great time," he said. "I had lots of friends. I was 19 at the time and it was very strange."

He was not entirely convinced by this experience that the way a person arranges his hair could so dramatically alter self-presentation. So he began observing people with this in mind. He collected photographs of the famous: actors, presidents, politicians. His sister got involved, and eventually they formulated a theory:

"A left hair part draws unconscious attention to the activities that are controlled by the left hemisphere of the brain, i.e. activities traditionally attributed to masculinity. A right hair part draws unconscious attention to the activities that are controlled by the right hemisphere of the brain, i.e. activities traditionally attributed to femininity."

The Walters deduced that men and women whose hair part is not in accord with their gender face difficulties. (Women are more favorably seen if they part on the right, except for women in high-powered jobs traditionally performed by men; for them a left part is acceptable.) Right-parting men, the Walters conclude, are less popular, among other things.

"They are usually abnormal," says John Walter. "Among American presidents, for instance, the small percentage with right parts were not universally loved: John Tyler, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, Chester Alan Arthur, Warren Harding."

Abraham Lincoln, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan all had right parts, but switched to left, which he did a few weeks after Walter's letter. Not in time, apparently, to prevent being ousted by right-parter Ronald Reagan. Nor has he ever acknowledged that he made the switch on the advice of a stranger. (Bill Clinton's hair part leans to the right.)

Actors with right hair parts, according to the Walters' theory, usually portray specific kinds of characters: scientists, artists, villains, mentally disturbed people. Most masculine heroes are left-parters, as are most people.

The Walters suspect that people in show business — casting agents, directors, hair stylists — are aware of this distinction, if only subconsciously. Why else, they ask, would Christopher Reeve have his hair parted on the right while playing Clark Kent and on the left while playing Superman? Why, indeed?

It's not easy to know what to conclude about all this. John Walter himself admits "most people think it's off the wall." (A subtle nod of assent is permissible.)

Seeing reality

More reasonable, perhaps, is Catherine Walters' argument that the false information provided by a standard mirror can lead to an imperfect perception of the physical self, and this in turn can produce social awkwardness. The True Mirror, they assert, clearly corrects that problem, if it is one.

It is also true that gazing into this mirror can be unsettling, to degrees that vary from person to person. (I felt slightly uncomfortable, and after about 10 seconds wouldn't look again. But I was uncertain whether my faint unease came from the unexpected view of myself or the fact that two people were watching me watch myself.)

It is likely that any odd reactions have to do with the fact that when you look into the True Mirror you are seeing a new face, not the face you are so accustomed to seeing in the mirror. The facial asymmetries that often present themselves in the True Mirror have always been there, but your brain, which searches for symmetry, and is your friend, has air-brushed them out. If you were to look into a True Mirror for several weeks the brain probably would do its work and they would disappear again.

But the True Mirror, as the Walters intend, is not for grooming. It's for introspection, for determining and fixing identity. Of course, certain professionals find uses for it, and these tend to make up the majority of the Walters' clientele. They include actors, dancers, portrait artists, psychiatrists — people like Dr. Gerald Epstein, a Manhattan psychiatrist, who exposes his patients to it.

"I've had people look into this mirror and get very upset, and have an imbalance, physically stumble," Epstein said.

He doesn't use it to treat specific disorders, "but to show people something about themselves they are not seeing. It has immediate therapeutic effect. It's as though they can see themselves as witnesses, step back and observe themselves instead of being wrapped up in the experience of themselves."