Trick Mirror

Jia Tolentino

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RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Tolentino, Jia, author.
Title: Trick mirror : reflections on self-delusion / Jia Tolentino.
Description: New York : Random House, 2019.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019000446| ISBN 9780525510543 | ISBN 9780525510550 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: United States—Civilization—21st century.
Classification: LCC E169.12 .T63 2019 | DDC 973.93—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019000446

Ebook ISBN 9780525510550

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Elizabeth A. D. Eno, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Sharanya Durvasula

v5.4

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Introduction

I wrote this book between the spring of 2017 and the fall of 2018—a period during which American identity, culture, technology, politics, and discourse seemed to coalesce into an unbearable supernova of perpetually escalating conflict, a stretch of time when daily experience seemed both like a stopped elevator and an endless state-fair ride, when many of us regularly found ourselves thinking that everything had gotten as bad as we could possibly imagine, after which, of course, things always got worse.

Throughout this period, I found that I could hardly trust anything that I was thinking. A doubt that always hovers in the back of my mind intensified: that whatever conclusions I might reach about myself, my life, and my environment are just as likely to be diametrically wrong as they are to be right. This suspicion is hard for me to articulate closely, in part because I usually extinguish it by writing. When I feel confused about something, I write about it until I turn into the person who shows up on paper: a person who is plausibly trustworthy, intuitive, and clear.

It's exactly this habit—or compulsion—that makes me suspect that I am fooling myself. If I were, in fact, the calm person who shows up on paper, why would I always need to hammer out a narrative that gets me there? I've been telling myself that I wrote this book because I was confused after the election, because confusion sits at odds to my temperament, because writing is my only strategy for making this conflict go away. I'm convinced by this story, even as I can see its photonegative: I wrote this book because I am always

confused, because I can never be sure of anything, and because I am drawn to any mechanism that directs me away from that truth. Writing is either a way to shed my self-delusions or a way to develop them. A well-practiced, conclusive narrative is usually a dubious one: that a person is "not into drama," or that America needs to be made great again, or that America is already great.

These essays are about the spheres of public imagination that have shaped my understanding of myself, of this country, and of this era. One is about the internet. Another is about "optimization," and the rise of athleisure as late-capitalist fetishwear, and the endlessly proliferating applications of the idea that women's bodies should increase their market performance over time. There's an essay about drugs and religion and the bridge that ecstasy forms between them; another about scamming as the definitive millennial ethos; another about the literary heroine's journey from brave girl to depressed teenager to bitter adult woman who's possibly dead. One essay is about my stint as a teenage reality TV contestant. One is about sex and race and power at the University of Virginia, my alma mater, where a series of convincing stories have exacted enormous hidden costs. The final two are about the feminist obsession with "difficult" women and about the slow-burning insanity that I acquired in my twenties while attending what felt like several thousand weddings per year. These are the prisms through which I have come to know myself. In this book, I tried to undo their acts of refraction. I wanted to see the way I would see in a mirror. It's possible I painted an elaborate mural instead.

But that's fine. The last few years have taught me to suspend my desire for a conclusion, to assume that nothing is static and that renegotiation will be perpetual, to hope primarily that little truths will keep emerging in time. While I was writing this, a stranger tweeted an excerpt of a *Jezebel* piece I wrote in 2015, highlighting a sentence about what women seemed to want from feminist websites —a "trick mirror that carries the illusion of flawlessness as well as the self-flagellating option of constantly finding fault." I had not remembered using that phrase when I came up with a book title, and

I had not understood, when I was writing that *Jezebel* piece, that that line was also an explanation of something more personal. I began to realize that all my life I've been leaving myself breadcrumbs. It didn't matter that I didn't always know what I was walking toward. It was worthwhile, I told myself, just trying to see clearly, even if it took me years to understand what I was trying to see.

The I in the Internet

In the beginning the internet seemed good. “I was in love with the internet the first time I used it at my dad’s office and thought it was the ULTIMATE COOL,” I wrote, when I was ten, on an Angelfire subpage titled “The Story of How Jia Got Her Web Addiction.” In a text box superimposed on a hideous violet background, I continued:

> But that was in third grade and all I was doing was going to Beanie Baby sites. Having an old, icky bicky computer at home, we didn’t have the Internet. Even AOL seemed like a far-off dream. Then we got a new top-o’-the-line computer in spring break ’99, and of course it came with all that demo stuff. So I finally had AOL and I was completely amazed at the marvel of having a profile and chatting and IMS!!

Then, I wrote, I discovered personal webpages. (“I was astonished!”) I learned HTML and “little Javascript trickies.” I built my own site on the beginner-hosting site Expage, choosing pastel colors and then switching to a “starry night theme.” Then I ran out of space, so I “decided to move to Angelfire. Wow.” I learned how to make my own graphics. “This was all in the course of four months,” I wrote, marveling at how quickly my ten-year-old internet citizenry was evolving. I had recently revisited the sites that had once inspired me, and realized “how much of an idiot I was to be wowed by *that*.”

I have no memory of inadvertently starting this essay two decades ago, or of making this Angelfire subpage, which I found while hunting for early traces of myself on the internet. It’s now eroded to

its skeleton: its landing page, titled “THE VERY BEST,” features a sepia-toned photo of Andie from *Dawson’s Creek* and a dead link to a new site called “THE FROSTED FIELD,” which is “BETTER!” There’s a page dedicated to a blinking mouse GIF named Susie, and a “Cool Lyrics Page” with a scrolling banner and the lyrics to Smash Mouth’s “All Star,” Shania Twain’s “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” and the TLC diss track “No Pigeons,” by Sporty Thievz. On an FAQ page—there was an FAQ page—I write that I had to close down my customizable cartoon-doll section, as “the response has been enormous.”

It appears that I built and used this Angelfire site over just a few months in 1999, immediately after my parents got a computer. My insane FAQ page specifies that the site was started in June, and a page titled “Journal”—which proclaims, “I am going to be completely honest about my life, although I won’t go too deeply into personal thoughts, though”—features entries only from October. One entry begins: “It’s so HOT outside and I can’t count the times acorns have fallen on my head, maybe from exhaustion.” Later on, I write, rather prophetically: “I’m going insane! I literally am addicted to the web!”

In 1999, it felt different to spend all day on the internet. This was true for everyone, not just for ten-year-olds: this was the *You’ve Got Mail* era, when it seemed that the very worst thing that could happen online was that you might fall in love with your business rival. Throughout the eighties and nineties, people had been gathering on the internet in open forums, drawn, like butterflies, to the puddles and blossoms of other people’s curiosity and expertise. Self-regulated newsgroups like Usenet cultivated lively and relatively civil discussion about space exploration, meteorology, recipes, rare albums. Users gave advice, answered questions, made friendships, and wondered what this new internet would become.

Because there were so few search engines and no centralized social platforms, discovery on the early internet took place mainly in private, and pleasure existed as its own solitary reward. A 1995 book called *You Can Surf the Net!* listed sites where you could read movie reviews or learn about martial arts. It urged readers to follow basic

etiquette (don't use all caps; don't waste other people's expensive bandwidth with overly long posts) and encouraged them to feel comfortable in this new world ("Don't worry," the author advised. "You have to *really* mess up to get flamed."). Around this time, GeoCities began offering personal website hosting for dads who wanted to put up their own golfing sites or kids who built glittery, blinking shrines to Tolkien or Ricky Martin or unicorns, most capped off with a primitive guest book and a green-and-black visitor counter. GeoCities, like the internet itself, was clumsy, ugly, only half functional, and organized into neighborhoods: /area51/ was for sci-fi, /westhollywood/ for LGBTQ life, /enchantedforest/ for children, /petsburgh/ for pets. If you left GeoCities, you could walk around other streets in this ever-expanding village of curiosities. You could stroll through Expage or Angelfire, as I did, and pause on the thoroughfare where the tiny cartoon hamsters danced. There was an emergent aesthetic—blinking text, crude animation. If you found something you liked, if you wanted to spend more time in any of these neighborhoods, you could build your own house from HTML frames and start decorating.

This period of the internet has been labeled Web 1.0—a name that works backward from the term Web 2.0, which was coined by the writer and user-experience designer Darcy DiNucci in an article called "Fragmented Future," published in 1999. "The Web we know now," she wrote, "which loads into a browser window in essentially static screenfuls, is only an embryo of the Web to come. The first glimmerings of Web 2.0 are beginning to appear….The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of texts and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens." On Web 2.0, the structures would be dynamic, she predicted: instead of houses, websites would be portals, through which an ever-changing stream of activity—status updates, photos—could be displayed. What you did on the internet would become intertwined with what everyone else did, and the things other people liked would become the things that you would see. Web 2.0 platforms like Blogger and Myspace made it possible for people who had merely been taking in