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## A Short History of the Shadow: An Interview with Victor I. Stoichita

CHRISTOPHER TURNER AND VICTOR I. STOICHITA



Komar & Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, 1982-83. Collection of the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Victor I. Stoichita, Professor of the History of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, is the author of *A Short History of the Shadow* (Reaktion, 1997). In exploring the writings of Plato, Pliny, Leonardo, and Piaget, Stoichita explains how the shadow has always been integral to theories of art and knowledge, and investigates the complex psychological meanings we project into shadows. Christopher Turner spoke to him by phone.

**Your book is the first study of its kind. Why do you think the subject was previously so overlooked?**

I actually started my research with that very question. Just before the publication of my book, an exhibition on shadows was organized at the National Gallery in London, accompanied by a short but interesting text by the late Ernst Gombrich. But previously art historians took a long time in paying attention to shadows because shadows are, so to speak, heavy, dark, and ugly. Perhaps this is because for the Greeks, the shadow was one of the metaphors for the *psyche*, the soul. A dead person's soul was compared to a shadow, and Hades was the land of shadows, the land of death.

**In Plato's story about the origin of knowledge, which contributed to this negative validation, you have to renounce the world of shadows before you can accede to true understanding.**

The prisoners in Plato's cave were incapable of gazing directly into the light of knowledge. They had their backs to this bright light and saw only the shadows cast on the cave walls. Plato's point was that they saw only the shadow of reality, not reality itself. The image had a tremendously negative charge for Plato and he linked the image with the shadow—both were copies of reality. And so, from the beginning on, to attain true knowledge one had to renounce the shadow stage and progress out of the cave, into the sun.

**Why do you dub Plato's origin myth a "sadistic scene"?**

Plato's story is so well-known—apparently well-known—that I tried to read it with fresh eyes and fresh thinking. It seemed to me that it was unnecessarily cruel to imagine, as he did, the people in the cave as bound, their legs and necks fastened. They were unable to move, forced to stare only at the projection of the world on the cave walls. It seemed to me that the philosopher was being blatantly sadistic. He has the perverse vision of a philosopher who enjoys the spectacle of ignorance as much as he enjoys the quest for knowledge.

**If, for Plato, the shadow is at the origin of duplication, imagined in a negative way, why are myths about the origin of painting so invested in the shadow?**

I was struck by the strange parallels between the Platonic story of the origins of knowledge and Pliny's story about the origin of painting. Maybe one of the most important differences between them is that, in Pliny's story about the origin of representation, the shadow wasn't charged with a negative aspect: the story of the maid of Corinth tracing her lover's shadow

on a wall and thereby giving birth to painting is a wonderful story, a love story, and not at all negative, unlike Plato's story about the origin of knowledge. But interestingly, despite the positive approach to the shadow in Pliny's story, the myth was slowly forgotten.

I think for the western mentality, accepting that representation originated in the absence of light, in a dark spot, was difficult to accept.

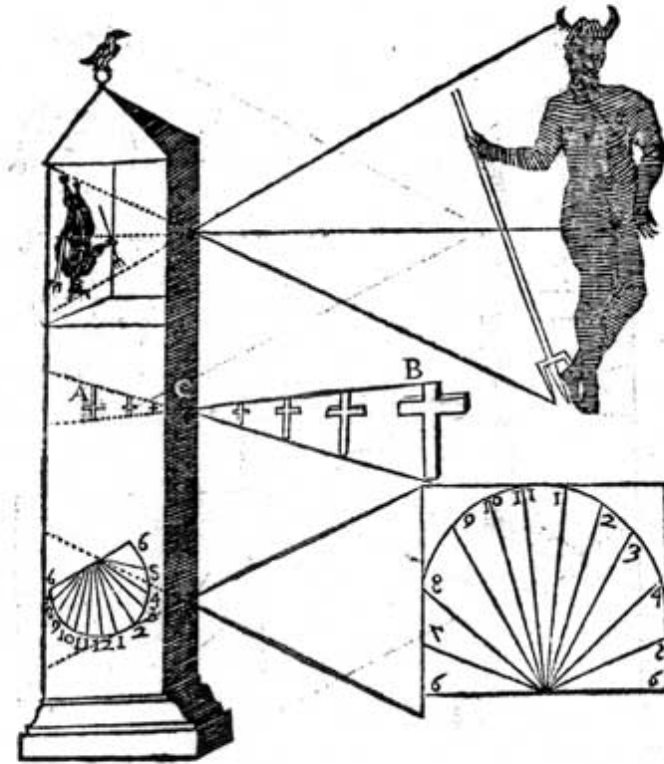


Illustration from *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae*, Athanasius Kircher's seminal 1646 treatise on light and shadow. In explaining the principle of the *camera obscura*, the illustration associates the image and the shadow with the devil.

**In Masaccio's frescoes in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence—one of the earliest examples of the use of perspective—shadows not only function to give a sense of space and volume but are also used as symbols. Can you explain the role shadows played in the iconography of the Renaissance?**

To represent a cast shadow correctly signifies a good knowledge of perspective, of three-dimensional space—this was one of the most important features of Renaissance painting, beginning with Alberti, Leonardo, and beyond. However, despite the importance of perspective, shadows don't feature very frequently in the paintings of the Renaissance and I asked myself, "Why?" Probably one reason was that shadows were dark and therefore considered ugly. Leonardo, and others after him, said

that the representation of shadows had to be correct but was not obligatory in painting. The painter was free to choose whether to represent them or not, because to represent all cast shadows would be too much.

Masaccio, one of the pioneers of Renaissance painting, was one of the first painters to explore the symbolism of the shadow. In his frescos in Santa Maria del Carmine he not only dealt with cast shadow in the frame of good, correct, and new perspectival representation, but he painted an actual story about cast shadow. It is the story of St. Peter healing the sick with his shadow, an old story told in the Acts of the Apostles. In the painting this miracle seems to be taking place before our very eyes. Two sick men that the apostle has already passed are now on their feet and another is in the process of standing.

Masaccio fused the visual representation of an ancient myth about the healing shadow with the newly acquired capacity of painting to correctly represent cast shadow. I found this very striking, very interesting. Through an extremely refined process, he brings together the two origins (sacred and scientific) in this *mise-en-scène* of the shadow's power.

**In Piaget's 1927 study of children's responses to shadows, it is only at a surprisingly late age that a child can understand them, in the sense of predicting where they will fall. Can you describe the evolution in the understanding of shadows for the child?**

Well, Piaget discovered four stages. In the first stage, experienced at around the age of five, a child can understand that a shadow is cast by an object, for instance his own hand, but he also considers it as the result of the confluence of two causes, one internal (the shadow *emanates* from the object, it *is* part of the object), the other external (the shadow comes from the night, from a dark corner of the room etc.). Piaget pointed at a five-year-old's shadow and asked him, "What is this?" The boy responded, "It's the shadow of the chair." Actually, he was sitting on the chair but he wasn't able to say, "That's my own shadow, sitting on the chair" because it was too difficult to recognize himself or his own double, his own projection, in the black spot.

The ability to recognize one's own shadow is actually a very difficult process, one that is only mastered at the age of eight or nine. That's when the child realizes that the shadow is not a substance behind the object that is driven away by light, and finally learns to predict where a shadow will fall. It's at this age that the shadow finally becomes synonymous with the absence of light.



Masaccio, *St Peter Healing the Sick with His Shadow*, 1427-1428. Fresco at the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

**In your book, you counterpose a shadow phase with Jacques Lacan's idea of the mirror phase. What's the difference? Does the child have a similar narcissistic identification with his or her shadow?**

Well, yes and no. First of all, the mirror phase is a very early one; for Lacan the child has a narcissistic relationship to his double as a mirror projection at a very young age, from six to eighteen months. Unfortunately, Lacan didn't speak of the relationship of a child to his own shadow, but only with his reflection. Although Piaget discovered that the child only recognized his shadow at a late age, that doesn't mean the child doesn't have a relationship with his shadow, but that the relationship, I think, is not one of identification but more of otherness, of alterity.

As Lacan has stated, the mirror stage involves primarily the identification of the *I*, whereas the shadow stage involves mainly the identification of the *other*. In light of this, we can understand why Narcissus fell in love with his specular image and not with his shadow. And we also understand why, to Pliny, the object of the young woman's love is the shadow of the other (the lover).

**In early emblem books, such as Johannes Sambucus's *Emblemata* (1564), the image of the guilty conscience is often portrayed as a shadow being cast by the sun, with God at its center. The guilty party is shown fighting his shadow, locked in an impossible battle. Does Piaget connect the child's concept of the shadow with guilt?**

The representations of the battle with one's shadow shows once more that in the West's old symbolic culture, the shadow was the enemy and the other. The text that accompanies the Sambucus emblem explains the strange behavior of turning against one's own shadow:

*Armed with a sword, his chest still heaving from the crime he has committed, the man wants to continue on his way. Occasionally he stops to stare in fear at his own shadow. He strikes it and orders it to go away. But when he sees the identical wounds, he shouts, 'Here is the one who betrayed my crime!!' Oh, how many times have murderers made of their remorse insane illusions, and fate armed them against themselves.*

It's an interesting question about Piaget and guilt, because actually the result of Piaget's experience was to point to the shadow as the representation of otherness but without going a step further and saying, "The otherness is charged with negative psychological value." For Piaget, the relationship of the child with the shadow hasn't that psychological charge because Piaget's psychology was Gestalt psychology and not a Freudian psychoanalytic one. So, for Piaget, the psychoanalytical charge of the shadow and its relation to guilt wasn't so important.





Machine for drawing silhouettes. From the 1792 English edition of Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

**In the Enlightenment, interpreting people's shadows became a sort of pseudo-science. You draw an interesting parallel between the Catholic confessional and the machine used by the eighteenth-century Swiss pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater for making silhouettes. Can you describe how in physiognomy the soul revealed its sins?**

In his four-volume *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater tried to convince his readers that the soul of the person can be decoded in the interpretation of their profile. This seemed to me a very symptomatic process. The topic of the face as a mirror of the soul is an old one, and Lavater sought to capture a symbolic projection of the soul of the person through his face. What was new in Lavater was that the face was interpreted not as a surface of signs but as a line, specifically as profile line, or in order to be more even precise, as the profile line of the cast shadow. It wasn't necessary for Lavater to reproduce the shadow.

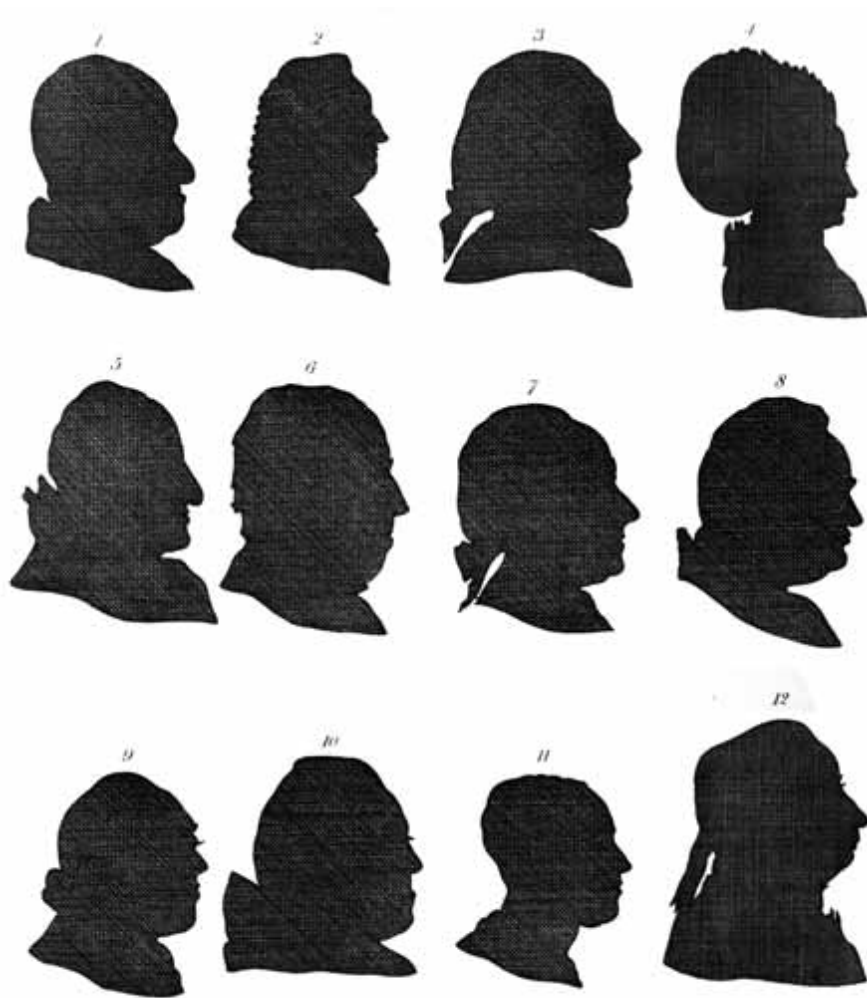
Lavater exploits—probably unconsciously—another ancient tradition: the one which recognized man's soul in his shadow, and a shadow in his soul.

To analyze the shadow is tantamount to a *sui generis* psychoanalysis. To Lavater, the outlined profile is a hieroglyph that has to be deciphered. The aim of Lavater's "shadow-analysis" is that it should be a new "cure for the soul." It sets off with a notion of Man that takes his divine origins into account. Man was made in God's image and likeness, but sin drove him to lose his divine likeness. His relationship with the divinity was overshadowed by flesh. In my view, Lavater identified the devil within, not without. A contemporaneous work, *On the Non-existence of the Devil* (1776), instructed: "Do not see the devil outside, do not seek him in the Bible, he is in your heart." The devil within was visualized in Lavater's science of physiognomy, projected in the shadow.

**As you point out, Lavater didn't conform to the Greek Ideal—the noble profile of the *Apollo Belvedere*—but held up Christ's profile as the prototype of physiognomic perfection. How did he know what Christ looked like?**

That's a good question. Obviously, he couldn't actually know, but there was a tradition of the visual representation of Christ. There are many legends about Veronica's veil, where Christ left an imprint of his face on a piece of cloth. What is different in Lavater's approach is his attention to the profile, because in the old stories about Christ he was always represented *en face*, in his majesty, not in profile. The representation of Christ's profile is not completely nonexistent in the Western tradition, but it is a case in point. Lavater also discusses the profile of *Apollo Belvedere* in a very critical mode: Apollo's profile is too perfect and his nose too small. In Lavater's mind this was a sign of lack of intelligence. It is also significant that in Lavater's book, Apollo's profile was represented as a black shadow, whereas Christ's silhouette is given a white interior. It would have been too much to represent Christ as a dark stain.





A page of profiles from Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

**Shadows often seem to have something primitive about them, appealing to primal fears. In fact, in your book you say that it was from anthropologists that you learned most about shadows. Can you elaborate on that?**

I sought out not the newer anthropology, but the old one. For example, James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922) was most interesting to me, despite its age. I was impressed by the capacity of Frazer to link the shadow with animism, with thinking about the soul and with the topic of the double.

**Can you describe the story of Peter Schlemihl, which illustrates many of those features? I was wondering why being robbed of one's shadow is akin to, I suppose not death, but eternal life, which is perhaps a sort of ghostly living death, as in the case of Peter Pan.**

Peter Schlemihl sold his shadow to a stranger—the devil—and thus became rich, but at the same time he lost something. He was incredibly wealthy but also incredibly unhappy because people were now suspicious of and repulsed by him. Well, the question is what exactly did he lose? The shadow is only a metaphor for something; it's a story about selling one's soul for advantage and for money and so on, but I think that the accent is

more on his identity rather than his soul. Peter Schlemihl continues to live, to exist, but robbed of his identity.

The second part of the tale is the story of his quest to regain it. Peter Schlemihl travels around the world in pursuit of his shadow, hoping to find himself once more. It always eludes him. In frustration he throws his purse, with all the money he got from the sale of his shadow, into an abyss, hoping for his shadow back, but that doesn't happen. It is too late.

**German Expressionist film is obviously famous for its use of crooked, distorted shadows that often play a narrative role as indicators of evil.**

In the famous still from Robert Wiene and Willy Hammeister's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, we see a gigantic projection of the character's shadow. Larger than the person, its dimensions are significant. It is the externalization of the person's inner self. It is as though the camera has first of all been able to plunge into the person's mind through the shadow, so that it could then project their inner self onto the wall. The shadow, an external image, reveals what is taking place inside the character: the profile looks vaguely anthropoidic, the fist unclenches to reveal shriveled fingers. The poetic message of the shadow is unequivocal: it is a metaphor, or more precisely, a hyperbole of the key medium of Expressionist cinema—the "close-up."



Illustration to accompany a 1918 Danish edition of Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl*, originally written in 1814.

**In your book, you quote the artist Christian Boltanski, who says that shadows are essentially early photographs, and you compare Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* to a fogged photograph. I was wondering whether you could say how the shadow haunts photography or writing about photography. How does the shadow relate to photography?**

Etymologically, *photography* means "writing or drawing with light." But we can also call photography a writing with shadow, or a writing with light and shadow. The early photographer, William Henry Fox Talbot, spoke of "shadowgraphy." With his "a-logical" painting, *Black Square* (1915), Malevich wittily illustrated this fact. When I tried to reconstruct the story of the hidden origins of the painting in terms of the Futurist courting of anti-representation, I was happy to discover an 1839 cartoon by "Cham" (Amédée de Noë) that represented a misphotograph. In this cartoon, an

accident in the taking of a photograph has caused the print taken from the fogged negative to develop as nothing but a black square. It was a pre-Malevich intuition of the death of representation in photography, in a representation of a deep shadow without light.

**I loved the symmetry of your book—how you started with the origin of painting and end with the death of painting. Many of the self-portraits by Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp that you analyze in the final chapter play on the profile, on the idea of the origin of art, but they might be better titled “the deconstruction of art.”**

Marcel Duchamp was the greatest deconstructor of tradition, and in Duchamp’s painting we have many important moments in which he’s dealing with shadows. *Tu m’* (1918), for example, is almost entirely composed of the shadows cast by his famous ready-mades. Another of Duchamp’s anti-paintings is *Fresh Widow*, made two years later. *Fresh Widow* is, in a sense, a later parallel to Malevich’s *Black Square*, only with the difference that Duchamp’s painting was also a dialogue with the whole tradition of the painting, of the tableau as an open window. For Leon Baptiste Alberti, the painting was to be imagined as an open window. It is very typical of Duchamp to play with the words “widow/window,” a pun illustrating the death of tableau painting and the Albertian tradition. Duchamp’s black panes symbolically close the entire history of representation.

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