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Shadow as a Metaphysical Metaphor

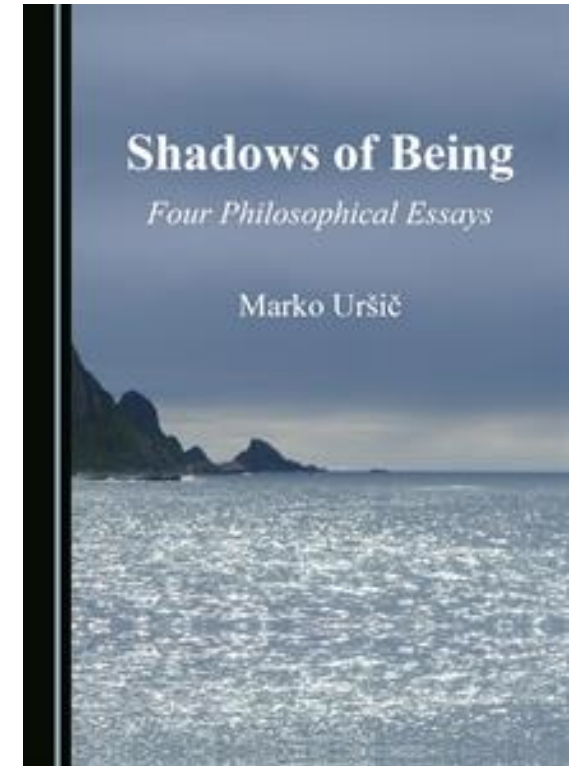
A presentation of the book:

Shadows of Being: Four Philosophical Essays

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018

online link: <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/shadows-of-being>

Rissho University, Tokyo, April 2019



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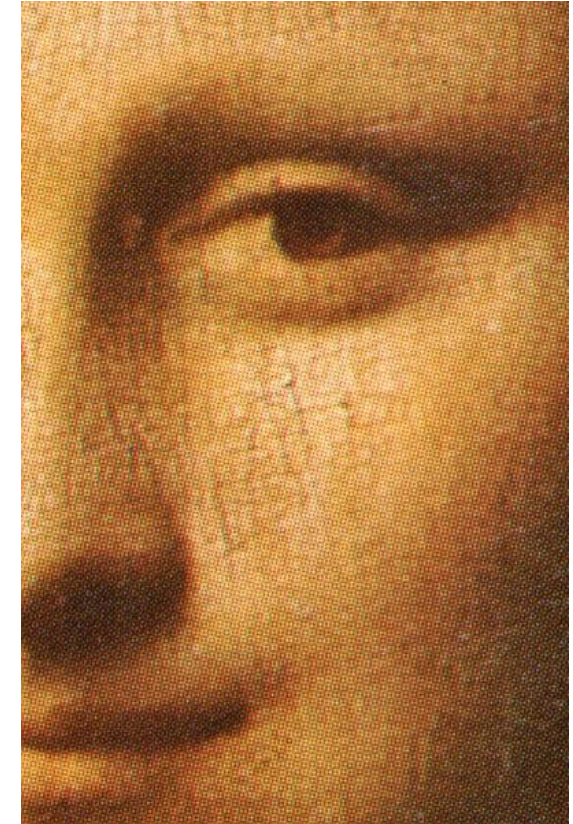
Leonardo da Vinci on shadows: *diminution* of light on a *surface* ...

In one of his notes, subsequently collected in the *Trattato della Pittura* (“The Treatise on Painting”), Leonardo da Vinci wrote that “shadow is the diminution of light and of darkness, and it is interposed between darkness and light.”

Among his numerous corollaries which follow from this simple and ingenious definition, I will point out the following two: “Shadow is the expression of bodies and of their shapes”, and “No opaque body can be visible unless it is clothed with a shaded and illuminated surface”.

Leonardo’s conception of shadow entails that in order to define shadow along with its middle position (or transience) between light and darkness, at least two additional concepts are relevant: *diminution* and *surface*.

Leonardo’s fragments need to be comprehended on two distinct semantic levels: on the first, of course, they are guidance to an apprentice, a young painter (and also to himself), on how to pursue painting to make an image as beautiful and convincing as possible; but on the second, more “internal” level, they yield a *metaphysical* contemplation on the “essence” of shadow and everything visible and invisible.



Leonardo da Vinci,
Mona Lisa (detail)

Metaphysical essence of shadow, Platonism

In four philosophical essays of the book *Shadows of Being*, I write on the shadows of *ideas*, the shadows of *bodies*, the shadows of *worlds*, and in the last and the largest essay, on the internet as our contemporary “world wide” web of the shadows of *reality*.

Let me first try to define the “metaphysical” *essence of shadow*. The metaphysical and also the physical essence of shadow (if we conceive of the latter as a “species” of the former) is a duplication or a replica of some form on another ontological (or existential) level—a replica which is the “diminution of strength”, or better still, the diminution of the reality of a more primal form.

In short, a *shadow is a less real replica of some form*.

Note: The ancient Greek term for shadow, *skía*, also means “trace” or “image”. In some of the Platonic texts, two terms *skía* and *eídolon* (image) are used as synonyms, e.g. in Plotinus’ treatise *On Beauty*, where beauties of the realm of sense are called “images and shadows” (*eídola kai skíai*) of the intelligible beauty of Forms (Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6.3, 34).

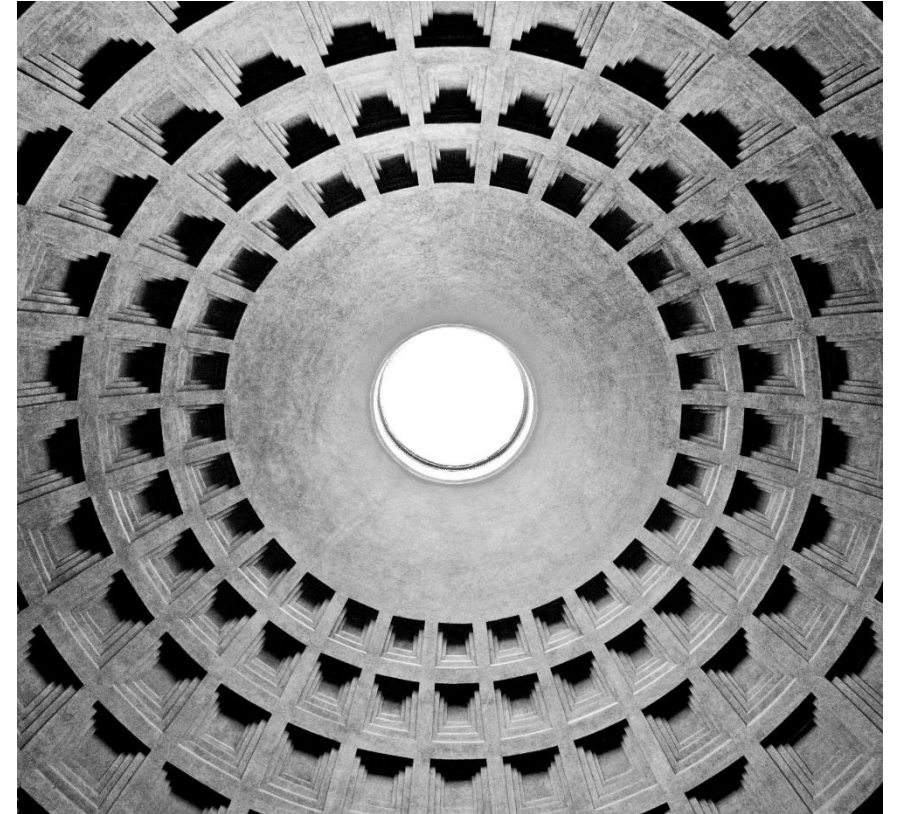


A selfie-shadow in autumn, Slovenia.

Shadows of ideas and shadows of things

What is more real or what has a “stronger existence” depends on what is taken as ontologically primal: if ideas are more real, if they have a “stronger existence” in relation to sensory (or material) things, then *things* are *shadows of ideas*, as is the case of ideas as Forms in Platonism—but if sensory things (i.e. bodies, inanimate and animate) are more real than ideas, we may state the opposite, i.e. that *ideas* are *shadows of things*, in a way as ideas are conceived of in modern empiricism.

However, even if ideas are more real and things are only their “copies”, sensory things, of course, possess visual, physical or *optical shadows*. For this reason, I say that physical shadows are a “species” of metaphysical shadows, since for the “usual” shadows it is true, very evident, that they are less real replicas of ontologically more primal forms, i.e. of sensory things or bodies in our common “reality”—although this reality is perhaps not the most *real* sphere of being.



Ceiling of the Pantheon in Rome, 2nd century AD.

Shadows on two- and three-dimensional „surfaces“

As far as the “surface character” of shadows is concerned, the analogy between the world of things and the world of ideas is multi-faceted. As a rule, shadows of sensory things or bodies are two-dimensional, although often twisted or broken on the surface on which they glide, whereas three-dimensional shadows have until recently been considered only as “spirits”, the phantasmagorical doubles made of some kind of “ectoplasm” or similar esoteric substances.

In the everyday context, *three-dimensional shadows of sensory things or bodies* are only a modern contrivance enabled by the discovery of holographic techniques, which open up inconceivable possibilities of the “simulacra” of the sensory world in the future.

But on the other hand, the three-dimensional “shadows of ideas” have always existed, as they are the very sensory things and bodies in our “real” three-dimensional world. Some have speculated that the Platonic “world of ideas” is located in the fourth or even some higher dimension (if time is considered the fourth dimension), but here we shall not venture so far.



A vase and shadows, photo by M.U.

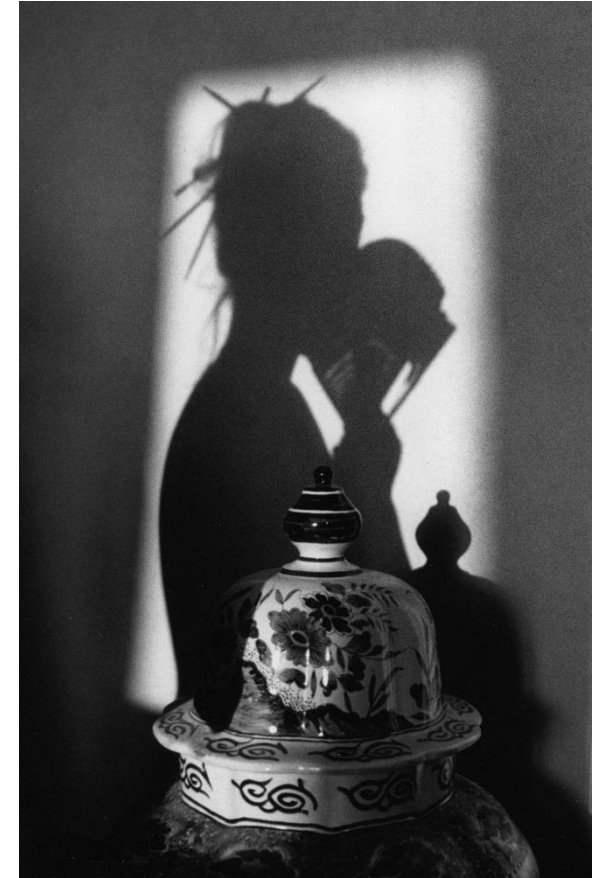
Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (*Rep.* 514a ff.)

So, shadows, if defined in the metaphysical sense, are not merely two-dimensional, but may also be three-dimensional. The main and the most general characteristic of shadows is that they have a weaker existence than their primal forms, whatever these may be.

Plato, with his famed *Allegory of the Cave*, wanted to say precisely this: as much as a two-dimensional shadow of a jar exists merely as a "copy" of a three-dimensional material object, i.e. the jar itself, so the jar also exists as merely a "copy" of the idea of a jar, namely by "participating" (in Greek: *méthexis*, in Japanese: *bunyū*) in the reality of its idea—or in other words, *ideas have a "stronger existence" than their shadows, their sensory objects, which are their "copies"*.

Surely, this thought may seem to us, people of the modern world, quite alien when we first come across it, but once fully comprehended it becomes clear and revelatory.

And if we ask simply: *why* does an idea have a "stronger existence" than things?—we may answer: a jar may be broken, but the idea of a jar is preserved, i.e. in the (universal) mind, in the transcendent "world of ideas".



A photo from the collection of Eva Petrič: *Gr@y Matter – Language of Shadows* (2009).

Dark and bright shadows

Although Leonardo da Vinci wrote that “shadow is diminution of light” which ends in darkness, this does not mean that a shadow is necessarily dark, obscure or grey. Bodies, as illuminated by the Sun, for example clouds in a spring sky or blooming trees in an orchard, are *bright shadows*, therefore, we may claim that they are also “shadows of ideas”, because with their sensory beauty they “participate” in the intelligible Beauty, as was taught by Plato and Plotinus.

And if a *soul* is a *shadow of the spirit*, the same applies to her, i.e. she is bright, though only when she is good. While the *angels, the glittering shadows of God* are even brighter.



Sakura, Tetsugaku no Michi, Kyoto, photo by Nel-Tu, from the internet.

Contemporary over-lit e-shadows

Nowadays, the bright shadows are not only *there*, in the transcendent spheres of being, but also *here*, in our everyday life: on television screens, we see bright shadows of people that we sometimes encounter in the street.

In the streets, particularly in large cities, bright shadows of more or less human figures are projected on digital screens to convey some message or convince us into doing something (usually buying a not indispensable item).

And on the film screens of thousands of contemporary Platonic “caves”, there live bright shadows that we share joy and sorrow with, we laugh or cry over their destiny, which is at the same time our own.



Ginza at night, photo by M. U., 2008

Shadows as „symbolic forms“ of the highest, transcendent Light

In all things there is the same and always differently real transcendence, in each little shadow there is Light which illuminates all beings from “inside out”: it is the Light which is named Good or One in Neoplatonism.

Nevertheless, since we are not *there* yet, on the “highest summit”—even if we are already *there* while being still on our way, i.e. if *here* is in the same time *there*—therefore, I am not saying *yet* that all *shadows are diminutions of the reality of the highest Light* (although I would indeed like to claim precisely this), but I shall rather say that *shadows are symbolic forms*—using a metaphysically more modest notion, which was introduced to modern philosophy by Ernst Cassirer.

In the four essays of my book *Shadows of Being*, I develop the idea of shadows mostly in terms of symbolic forms which open up and maintain the *metaphysical distinction* between lower and upper levels or links of the “Great Chain of Being”—and thus maintain the *transcendent tension* in the *immanence* of the world.



Midnight Sun and human shadows
at Nordkapp, Norway.
Photo by M. U., July 3, 2016.

From Homeric to Orphic Shadows

In the development of the Greek spirit from Homer through the Orphics to Plato, we may trace the metamorphosis of shadows following our definition in terms of replicas and/or diminutions of more primal realities. Similar to other ancient civilizations, reality with the Greeks was first conceived of as a predominantly sensory, lived experience; however, afterwards, especially with Platonism, they saw and discovered “the world of ideas”.

Therefore, the *primal* reality gradually became more and more intellectual and “transcendent” with regard to everyday life, although for the Ancient Greeks—all the way until Christianity—even *there* (i.e. the place or the kingdom of gods) actually remained *here*, in the unique world, since for them, the boundary between the earth and the sky was passable (at least in mind and imagination) already during one’s lifetime, and not only with death.



Zeus conquering Typhoon,
an ancient Greek ceramics

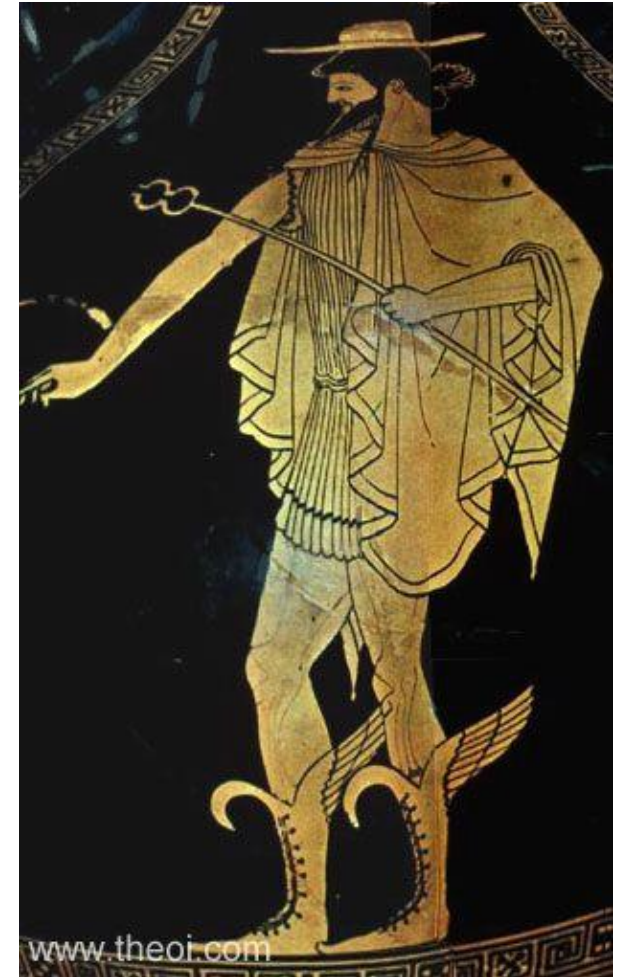
Hermes, guide of souls

Walter F. Otto, in his book *The Homeric Gods (Die Götter Griechenlands, 1929)*, subtitled “The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion” (*Das Bild des Göttlichen im Spiegel des griechischen Geistes*), enthusiastically and inspiringly writes about the still “living” Greek gods – living in a poetic and imaginary sense, of course.

Among the best pages in this book are those in which Otto writes about the shadow-souls of the dead, especially in the chapter on Hermes Psychopompus (guide of souls). Hermes is also called “the lord of roads”, and Otto says that he is the “friendliest of the gods to men”, since he leads men in lands *here* and *there*. A short quotation:

“The mystery of night seen by day, this magic darkness in the bright sunlight, is the realm of Hermes. [...] Nightness vanishes, and with it distance; everything is equally far and near, close by us and yet mysteriously remote.”

In the central chapter of this book, titled “The Nature of Gods: Spirit and Form”, Otto demonstrates a “dialectical” opposition between the dark world of the deceased souls and the ever shining light of the world of the Homeric gods.



The Greek god Hermes,
a painted vase

Odysseus' descent into Hades

Among Odysseus' encounters with the dead shadows in Hades, that with his deceased mother is particularly moving: she, too, is awakened from forgetfulness, Odysseus talks to her and traces memories with her, but when he wants to embrace her, her shadow slips through his hands:

*... I bit my lip,
rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,
and tried three times, putting my arms around her,
but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable
as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.*

(Homer 1971, 183 [*The Odyssey*, XI, 73–77])

This pain, the pain of passing, sinking into forgetfulness, disappearance, the impossibility of a living contact and touch, the awareness of an irreversible departure, is the worst pain of the spirit. Therefore, even the sublime feature of Greek sorrow, which is beautifully described by Walter Otto with reference to Odysseus' descent into the underworld, into the realm of dead shadows, down to the eternal images of "has been", is not the final answer to the enigma of the relationship between life and death.



Odysseus performs sacrificial slaughter in front of the cave of Hades, around which shadows gather to be brought back to life by drinking blood.
Greek painted ceramics.

Orphic eschatology of bright shadows, immortal souls

Along with the legends of Orpheus, many Orphic inscriptions have been preserved in graves as “gold tablets”. The texts from these tablets were collected by Otto Kern in *Orphicorum fragmenta* (1922).

The Orphics imagined the world of the deceased quite differently to that of the underworld represented in Homeric epics. They felt that the shadows in the afterlife were *bright*, divine, and heavenly, as we can read on the Petelia gold tablet (4th–3rd century BC), which contains one of many similar “guides” for the soul of the deceased on her way to the world beyond:

*You will find in the halls of Hades a spring on the left,
and standing by it, a glowing white cypress tree;
Do not approach this spring at all.
You will find another, from the lake of Memory [Mnemosyne],
refreshing water flowing forth. But guardians are nearby.
Say: “I am the child of Earth [Gaia] and starry Heaven [Uranus];
But my race is heavenly; and this you know yourselves.
I am parched with thirst and I perish; but give me quickly
refreshing water flowing forth from the lake of Memory.”
And then they will give you to drink from the divine spring ...*



Hermes, Eurydice, and Orpheus. Marble.
Roman copy of a Greek original by
Alcamenes, disciple of Phidias, 5th
century BC. National Museum in Naples.

Dionysius the Areopagite: lights as shadows of the divine gloom

One of the most mysterious sentences in the treatise *Mystical Theology* by the Greek Christian author (Pseudo)-Dionysius (or Denys) the Areopagite (5th–6th century AD) is the one where the mystic says, referring to Moses' "dark cloud where God was" (Ex 19:21), that we must abstract all the known so that "[we] may see that superessential gloom, which is hidden by all the light in existing things."

It may be easier to perceive the mystery of this sentence if we paraphrase it symbolically as the idea that lights veil the divine gloom or—even more appropriate for our context—that even the brightest shadows are diminutions of the supreme, "superessential" darkness. I think that we should try to accept the quoted enigmatic sentence as a paradox, as the mystical insight that the *angelic lights shade the divine darkness*.

For Dionysius, God is hidden in the "superessential gloom", He is screened from us as He was from Moses by "the cloud of unknowing", nevertheless His unfathomable presence-in-absence is revealed to us in the bright "shadows" of angelic countenances and figures.



Le Corbusier, Our Lady of the Heights,
Ronchamp, France, 1955.
Detail of the interior.
Photo by M. U., 2008.

Dante's hierophany of shadows

In the magnificent poetic fabric of the *Divine Comedy*, the “ontology of shadows” also follows the path of the poet’s (and thus the reader’s) gradual “spiritualisation”: In *Inferno* they are dark, in *Purgatorio* they are lighter, and in *Paradiso* they are shining, fiery, gleaming...

The expression “shadows” or “shades” (Italian: *ombra*) appears, in the nine circles of Hell and, partly, in the lower levels of Purgatory, as a synonym for dead souls, where Dante draws on the tradition of the ancients (particularly Homer and Virgil). Yet the equation of shadows and souls is merely apparent and superficial, since the denizens of the dark world beyond are *shadows from far off*, *souls from close up*—suffering souls, each with her own story, which we learn when we approach her, listen to her and feel her pain: at this point she is of course no longer “merely a shadow” among thousands of other anonymous shadows. Each is a unique and irreplaceable soul, a soul with a suffering and also loving body, although in the world beyond.

How, for example, could the tragic lovers Francesca and Paolo be mere shadows? Could shadows love each other so much that their love could not be extinguished even after death (see *Inferno*, v, 100–105)?



Gustave Doré, Dante and Beatrice in front of the Celestial Rose, illustration for Dante's *Paradise*, Canto xxxi. Woodcut, 1880.

Shadows of bodies at the beginning of the Modern Age

With the modern era, born out of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance over several centuries, the whole world becomes one great “re-presentation” (and/or “performance”) that increasingly reveals itself before *my* human eyes. And this new “logic” of the imaginarium of the beyond is also followed by the iconography of shadows. From the early Renaissance onwards (Masaccio, Fra Angelico et al.), “physical” (optical) shadows become a common element of paintings, including sacred images, as we see also in the fresco of Luca Signorelli →

If we look for a moment back to Dante, even the shades in his “other worlds” are, in the end, *shadows of bodies*. Belief in the reality of the “pure spirit”, i.e. the Platonic world of ideas transformed into the Christian angelic world, remains an indelible element of Dante’s cosmos, but with the end of the Middle Ages this reality of the spirit is increasingly supplanted by the *reality of this world*—more accurately, the “other world” becomes again (after the Homeric Age) the analogical transfer or “projection” of the reality *here* to the reality *there*. Shadows become less and less shadows of ideas and, increasingly, shadows of bodies.



Luca Signorelli, Resurrection of the Flesh, detail from the fresco cycle in the San Brizio Chapel, Orvieto Cathedral, circa 1500. Photo by M.U., 2007.

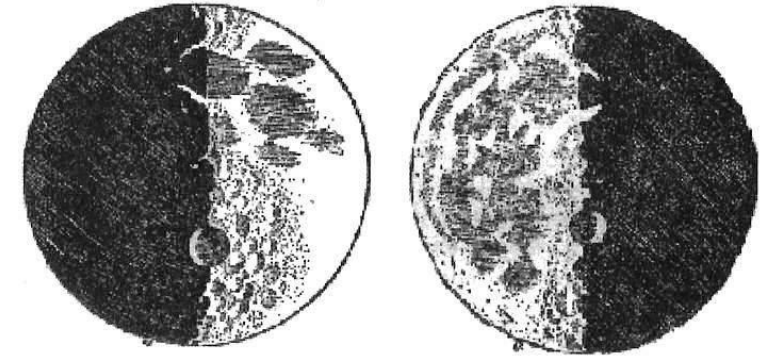
Galileo's discovery of the shadows on the Moon

Galileo Galilei was the first to investigate celestial phenomena using a telescope (*perspicillum*), a new instrument invented in the Netherlands, which was primarily used for military and nautical purposes. In 1610, Galileo published his discoveries in *Sidereus Nuncius* (*Starry Messenger*).

In the context of our discussion of shadows, the most important of Galileo's "news from the stars" is the discovery of mountains and valleys on the Moon. It significantly changed the way the Moon appeared to the human gaze and understanding: the Moon became *like* Earth, it became the closest *other world* like our own world. All because of *shadows*.

There is something enigmatic about the fact that shadows from *there*, in this case from the Moon, substantially influence not only how we understand our world but also what is going on *here*—in this very world that revealed itself to Galileo and to his followers, including us as we read his treatises almost four hundred years later, in a new and different manner *because* of the play of light and shadows that come to us from elsewhere, from a place "beyond" our world.

GALILEO GALILEI: SIDEREUS NUNCIUS



quæ ex parte Solis sita est. Imminuta deinde luminosa superficie, cum primum tota ferme dicta macula tenebris est obducta, clariora montium dorsa eminenter tenebras scandunt. Hanc duplicem apparentiam sequentes figuræ commonstrant.

Galileo's drawing of the "terminator",
i.e. the dividing line between light and shade
on the Moon's surface.

From *Sidereus Nuntius*, 1610.

David Deutsch: quantum shadows of other universes

David Deutsch, a professor of quantum physics at the University of Oxford, is one of the foremost proponents of the quantum multiverse, i.e. of the theory originally formulated by Hugh Everett in 1957. The core of this rather speculative idea is that all quantum “superpositions”, mathematically expressed in Schrödinger’s equation of the quantum “wave function”, are ontologically *real*—each of these variants in its own universe (or world in a broad sense)—so that no “collapse” of the wave functions happens with a measurement, with the passage from a quantum state to our “normal”, observed “macroscopic” state of the world.

According to Everett’s and Deutsch’s theory, the multiverse quantum wave function continues after a measurement, developing all the time (more accurately, in all times), running along mutually separated “parallel” universes, and permanently branching into new universes (or worlds). While we live on only one “branch” of this unfathomably immense multiverse, its other “branches” (i.e. other universes or worlds) are—as Deutsch claims—present in our universe as “shadows”, as *shadows of other worlds*, other universes.



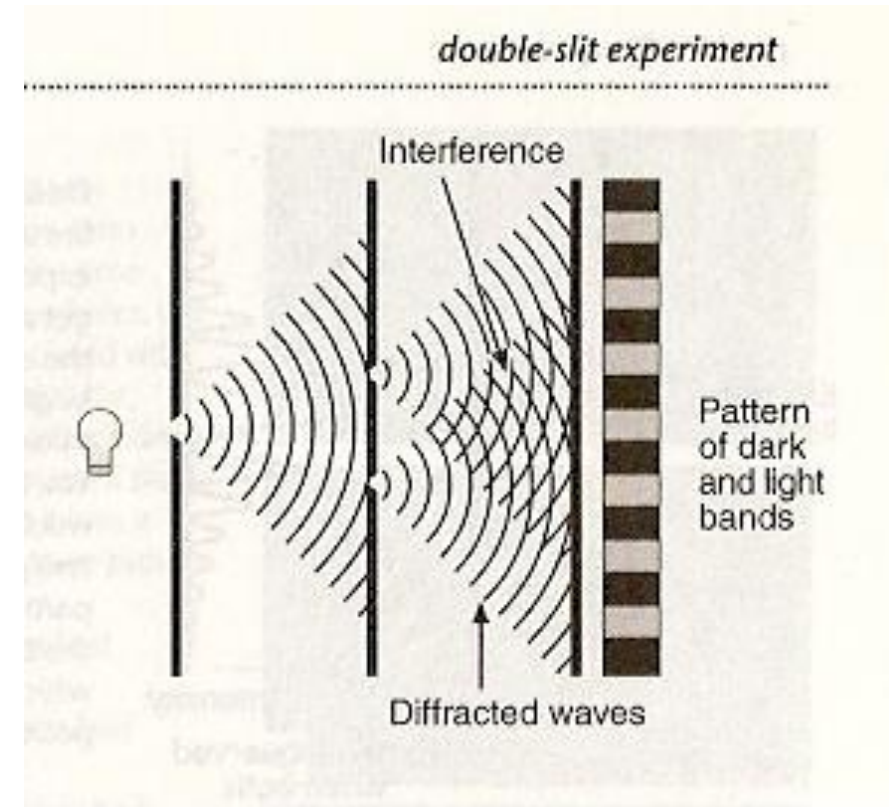
Mojca Senegačnik, *Three Shadows*, acrylic and graphite, Slovenia, 2016.

“Tangible photons” and “shadow photons”

What are Deutsch’s scientific arguments for the *reality* of the quantum multiverse? The well-known quantum slit experiments are of crucial importance for his argument, since they can demonstrate that photons (or other particles such as electrons), when projected through slits, display interference patterns on a screen *even* if they come through the slits *separately*, one by one, which is technically possible to perform.

The question raised by this phenomenon, which is answered differently by several interpretations of quantum mechanics, is the following: How is it possible for a *single* photon to “interfere” with itself? Or, as Deutsch asks: “When a single photon at a time is passing through the apparatus, what can be coming through the other slits to interfere with it?” (Deutsch, *The Fabric of Reality*, 1997, p. 43). His answer is a radical one that refers to multiverse:

“It does appear that photons come in two sorts, which I shall temporarily call *tangible* photons and *shadow* photons. Tangible photons are the ones we can see, or detect with instruments, whereas the shadow photons are intangible (indivisible)—detectable only indirectly through their interference effects on the tangible photons. [... However] we shall see that there is no intrinsic difference between tangible and shadow photons: each photon is tangible in one universe and intangible in all the other parallel universes ...” (*ibid.*, pp. 43–44).



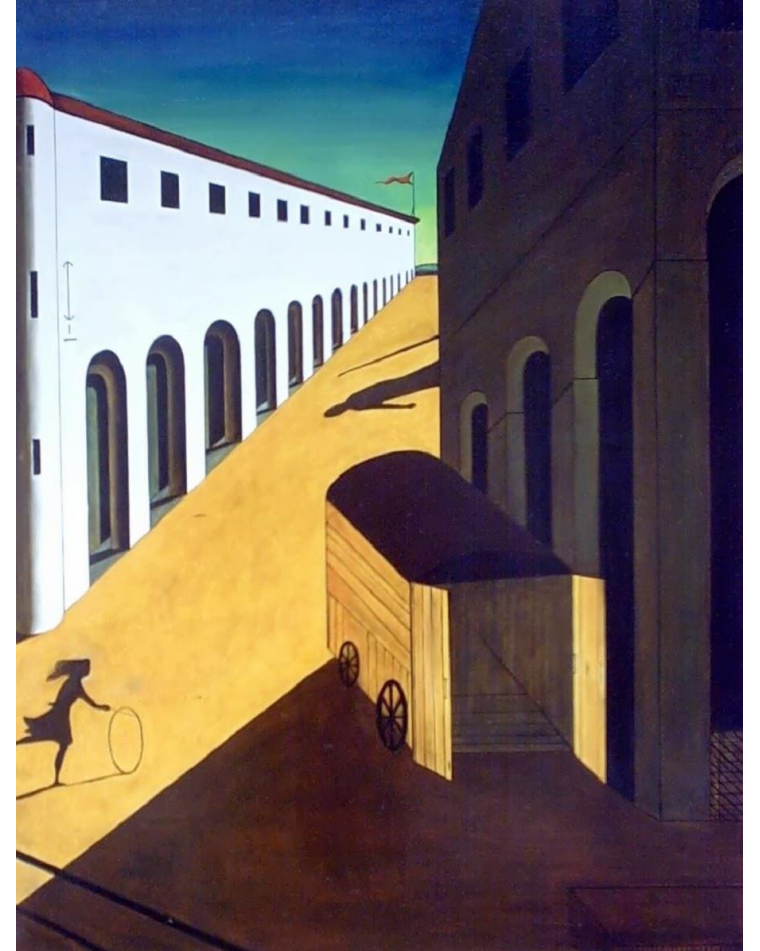
Metaphysical shadows of Giorgio de Chirico

Visual art, especially modern art, is a great ramified multiverse of imaginary worlds—more so, probably, than it has ever been in the past, at least within a single culture. The Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico is well known for his “metaphysical paintings”, which had a powerful influence on Surrealism.

In *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* we see, in sharp transitions of light and shadow that are characteristic of De Chirico’s art, a little girl—she is almost a *shadow*—running with a hoop “up” a sunlit street towards another shadow of an invisible big figure (maybe a warrior with a spear?) behind the corner of the dark building on the right.

Some interpreters of this picture draw attention to the mismatched perspectives of the buildings on the left and right: the vanishing point (i.e. the point of intersection of the perspectival lines) is not the same for both buildings, as it should be. Rudolph Arnheim wrote in his famous book *Art and Visual Perception* (1954) about this picture the following:

“At first glance the scene looks solid enough, and yet we feel that the unconcerned girl with the hoop is endangered by a world about to crack along invisible seams or to drift apart in incoherent pieces [...] and the rising street with the bright colonnade is only a treacherous mirage guiding the child to plunge into nothingness.”

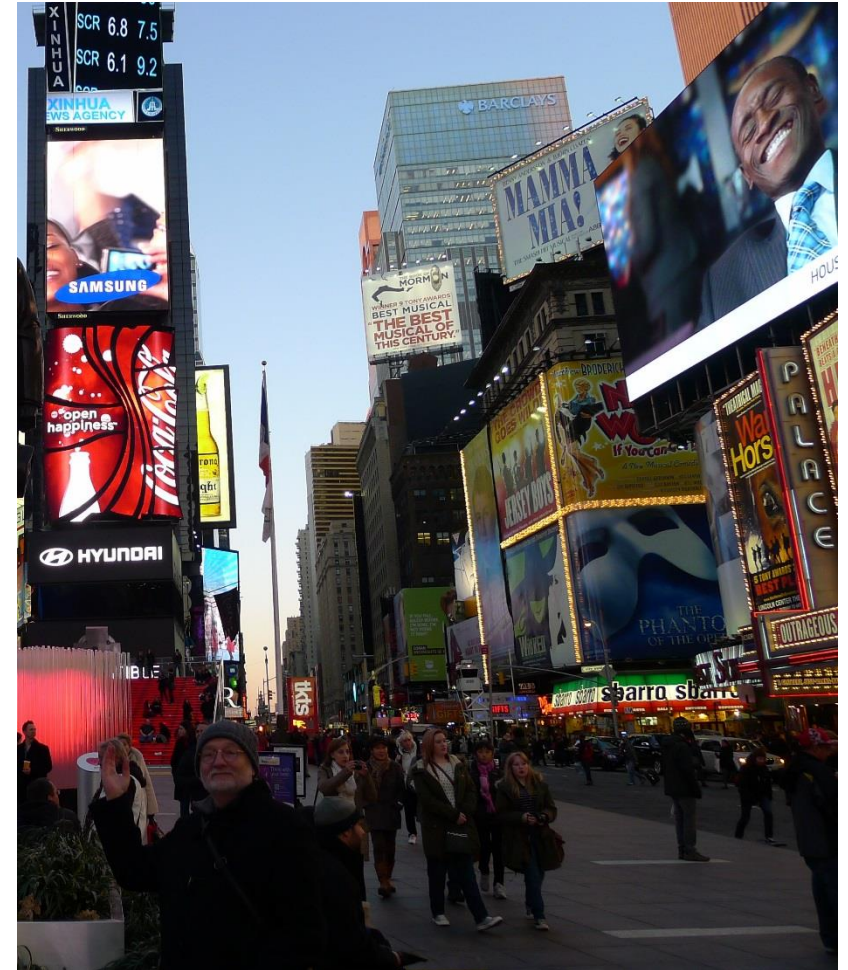


Giorgio de Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, oil on canvas, 1914.

Over-lit contemporary bright shadows

The over-lit shadows of every colour in our (post)modern, “desanctified”, virtually real world are no longer angels but merely their profane simulacra: on computer screens, “smart” phones, advertising displays, *everywhere*. The majority of these modern angels look at us “eye to eye”, “face to face”, as though they want to make us understand that they are *truly* alive, that they are not merely our mirror reflections but rather our “avatars” and invite us to join them and—with them or through them—start to live better in this brave new world: more hedonistically, more prodigally, and of course in as leisurely and carefree a manner possible, like the happiest consumers—while the giant displays that surround us hide a much darker reality behind their shiny surface: the fact that we are increasingly becoming the willing slaves (or enslaved freemen) of this enormous, technological and economic World Wide Web that is turning into a chaotic and decentred universal Labyrinth.

But is it *really* so? Not entirely, since despite this universality of virtual reality, our *inwardness* remains “outside it”—the depth of the world in me, in my *consciousness*, my soul and my mind: and the way back—is the way *to the self*. The lesson old Socrates taught us is still the most important: *Know thyself!* (For: you yourself are shadow, you yourself are light...)



Times Square in New York, 2012

Virtual shadows of reality and Jean Baudrillard's "perfect crime"

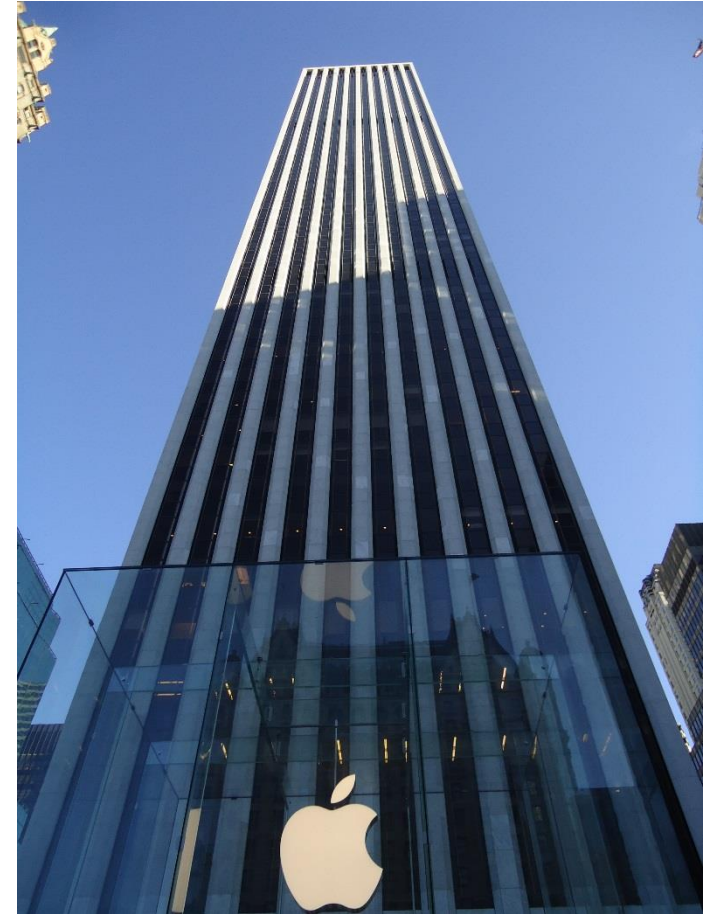
Even before the global internet boom, the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote almost prophetic thoughts about virtual reality. At that time, i.e. in the last decade of the past century, when his book *The Perfect Crime* (1995) was published, the main signs of the virtualisation of the world were already evident. However, his warning has become very actual in our time (I write about that in the fourth essay of my book *Shadows of Being*).

What Baudrillard calls "the perfect crime" is the total blurring of the difference between the real and virtual worlds—which in the context of my book means the complete equating of things (and/or ideas) with their shadows.

The perfect crime would be the "murder of reality", says Baudrillard, an accomplished "hyperreality" of simulacra, their total predominance, which would finally erase the difference between originals and copies or replicas, and also the difference between the real and the imaginary.

After the "perfect crime", there would no longer be that ontological-ethical tension that I have called "transcendent tension", any distinction between true and false would be eliminated and all would be just the *surface* of the world, of the three- or four-dimensional "plane" (if we also include time) without any kind of metaphysical *depth*.

However, I firmly hope that "the perfect crime" would never happen. – But, unfortunately, other terrible crimes do happen ...



The *Apple* Tower, New York,
photo by M. U., 2012.

Terrible human crimes that should never be forgotten ... lest they do not happen again



Twin Towers, NY,
9/11, 2001

After the attack on Twin Towers in NY, Baudrillard wrote an essay *The Spirit of Terrorism* (together with a shorter essay “Requiem for the Twin Towers”), which raised a good deal of dust. In this essay, Baudrillard wrote the following, very questionable statement: “At a pinch, we can say that they [i.e. the terrorists] *did it*, but we *wished for it*.” – I absolutely do not agree with this cynical statement, however, the 9/11 tragic event should be and stay a remainder for all of us.

We also have to remember another, even more tragic and horrible event in our – and especially in your, Japanese – not very distant past: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This shadow on the wall, like many other traces of the tragic events in 1945 remind us of a terrible “artificial sun” created by *homo sapiens* in order to burn other human beings, those who should have been like “brothers and sisters” to him, as taught long ago by that good prophet whom a large part of the Western world worships as the Son of God. What would the teacher Jesus of Nazareth (or, in the East, the compassionate Buddha Kannon) say nowadays, if being confronted with these somber shadows? ...



Hiroshima,
the atomic shadow of
a workman with a ladder

Let me finish with brighter tones, with Tanizaki and Issa ...

In his wonderful, melancholy and nostalgic book *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), Tanizaki Jun'ichirō wrote also the following:

“Whenever I see a *tokonoma* in a tastefully built Japanese room, I marvel at our comprehension of the secrets of shadows, our sensitive use of shadow and light. For the beauty of the *tokonoma* is not the work of some clever device. An empty space is marked off with plain wood and plain walls, so that the light drawn into it forms dim shadows within emptiness. There is nothing more. And yet...”

And just for the end, here is a haiku of Kobayashi Issa, which I have chosen as a motto to my book *Shadows of Being*:

斯う活て 居るも不思議ぞ 花の陰 一茶

Just being alive!
—miraculous to be in
cherry blossom shadows!



Tokonoma at Koto-in, Daitoko-ji, Kyoto,
photo by M. U., 2008

Thank you for your attention!