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The Emancipation of Images

*The Optical Unconscious of
Hans Christian Andersen's "The Shadow"*

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The Optical Unconscious of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Shadow"

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One of the hallmarks of modernity is the invention of a wide range of new techniques for recording, reproducing and transmitting sound and images and the subsequent introduction and expansion of many new media, notably photography, phonography, and telephony. The famous label for the epoch introduced by Walter Benjamin, the "age of mechanical reproduction", refers to this process, which irreversibly altered the conditions for the production and reception of artworks.¹ Following this hypothesis, great attention has been given in recent years to the influence of technology, and media technology in particular, on the development of the aesthetics and language of literature.² In this article I wish to test this approach on Hans Christian Andersen's short and classic doppelgänger

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1 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968) 217-252.

2 See, for instance, Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism. Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body. A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

story "The Shadow", about a scholar, who loses his shadow and becomes haunted and eventually killed by it. I will read it with a special emphasis on its relations to nineteenth century visual mass culture and, particularly, I want to explore the relations between "The Shadow" and two media technologies: first, the so-called *Schattenspiel an der Wand* – literally, shadow pictures upon the wall – which was a pre-cinematic aesthetic technology for the creation of moving images that grew immensely popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries both as a public and private entertainment; and, second, *daguerreotypy*, one of the earliest techniques for photographic reproduction.

"The Shadow" was written in 1846 and published the year after – that is, in the first decade after the invention of photographic reproduction, at a time when the daguerreotype was being popularized and made available to a rapidly expanding audience. Hans Christian Andersen had become fascinated with this emergent medium from an early stage; he conveys in a letter from 1839 how "delighted" he is with Daguerre's invention, which "occupies [him] a lot".³ But Andersen was also, as we shall see, very quick to observe some of the gloomier aspects of photography. To be sure, no reference is made to either of these techniques in the text itself. Even so, I will argue that they provide a context in which to approach "The Shadow" and understand its special appeal to the contemporary imagination and its pertinence to the understanding of the traumatic implications of the new visual economy founded upon photography.

This historical understanding of Andersen's "The Shadow" differs from the standard interpretation of it, which conceives of it in psychological terms

3 Hans Christian Andersen in a letter to Chr. Høegh-Guldberg, dated February 2, 1839; quoted from Gerhart Schwarzenberger, "Den ældre H. C. Andersen og »det nye«", *Danske Studier* 1962, 33-34. This article offers a valuable introduction to Hans Christian Andersen's reception of the technological inventions of his time.

and emphasizes its universal implications.⁴ There is a long tradition for regarding the detachment of the shadow as a psychological cleavage, a split personality to be diagnosed according to various psychoanalytical theories.⁵ Otto Rank's seminal study on *Der Doppelgänger*, originally published in 1914 in *Imago: Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften*, edited by Sigmund Freud, has been of tremendous importance to this line of reception of the text. "The Shadow" is briefly analyzed by Rank and included among the "literary representations of the double-motif which describe the persecution complex" and "confirm not only Freud's concept of the narcissistic disposition toward paranoia, but also [...] reduce the chief pursuer to the ego itself, the person formerly loved most of all".⁶ The duplication of the self that takes place in "The Shadow" has, accordingly, been considered as a psychodrama between a man and his demonic double, the shadow, which is perceived as an externalization of his inner self. This interpretation of the text has been further developed and sustained in Denmark by the modernist author Villy Sørensen, who held, in 1954, that the tale "is not about two persons but about two sides of the same person [...] and about the cleavage in this human being, as soon as the shadow emancipates itself and leads an independent life". This psychopathological understanding of the "The Shadow" as a story about split personality has been predominant in the Danish reception of the text.⁷

4 One exception, though, is Uffe Hansen, who has recently pointed to a historically specific context for the split personality of "The Shadow", namely the phenomenon of Mesmerism, a hypnotic induction held to involve animal magnetism that was en vogue in certain of the circles in which Andersen was moving at the time ("H.C. Andersens *Skyggen* i en overset idehistorisk sammenhæng," in *KRITIK*, no. 165 (2003) 63-70).

5 Villy Sørensen's interpretation was first published as a feature article in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, August 12, 1954, and has recently been reprinted in Villy Sørensen, *Sørensen om Andersen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2004) from which I quote (54).

6 Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 75.

7 According to Inger Lise Jensen, Villy Sørensen "offered a new conceptual framework for understanding the fairy tale" ("Why Are There So Many Interpretations of H.C. Andersen's

Within this conceptual framework "The Shadow" has traditionally been understood as an exploration of a universal and timeless theme, the relation of the self to the self.

What I want to do instead is to contemplate some historical correlates to the tale, and I will do so by considering the more superficial issue of the semiotic connection that the story is centered upon, between a man and his shadow. The split that I will be concerned with is semiotic more than psychological. The alternative I propose is to approach the "optical unconscious" of the story rather than the unconscious in the usual psychoanalytic sense. This expression, "the optical unconscious", was one that Walter Benjamin introduced in an article from 1931 on the history of photography and especially about the revelatory effects of early photography. The term refers to those aspects of visual reality which remain unregistered by ordinary perception, as for instance the infinitesimal steps of human locomotion, which chronometric photography was suddenly able to record and expose to the human eye. The camera was, in other words, able to see more than meets the naked eye, and therefore Benjamin concludes that it "is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis".⁸

In a comparable manner, "The Shadow" lets us discover some of the collective fears and fantasies that were stimulated by the emergent media. "The

'the Shadow'?" in *H.C. Andersen: Old Problems and New Readings*, ed. Steven P. Sondrup (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2004, 292), but, as we have seen, Sørensen's reading was in line with Otto Rank's psychopathological understanding. A good collection of readings of "The Shadow" has been published by Finn Barlby in *Det Dæmoniske Spejl. Analyser Af H.C. Andersens "Skyggen"* (Copenhagen: Dråben, 1998). The status of the tale in Danish literature can be measured not only by the number of readings but also from the number of other canonical stories that it has prompted or inspired: Tom Kristensen's 1930 novel *Havoc*, Isak Dinesen's "The Dreamers" in the 1934 collection *Seven Gothic Tales* and Villy Sørensen's short story "Duo" from his 1953 collection *Strange Stories*.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), vol. 2, part 2, 510-512.

Shadow" can be read as a very early response to this new technology that registers very precisely some of its traumatic implications. The emancipation of the shadow is an experience, I want to argue, which, albeit improbable, had a shape which would have seemed recognizable to a contemporary audience.

I The Savant and the Shadow

But let me begin by providing you with an outline of the plot. A young scholar from the north sojourns in the south, where the sun beats down, and the heat is unbearable. All day he is forced to stay in his room with the shutters drawn and doors closed. Only after sunset is it possible for him to go outside. He spends his evenings on the balcony where candlelight from the room behind him projects his shadow on the balcony of the house in front of him. The man contemplates the flickering image of his shadow on the wall and one night encourages it, jokingly, to step inside the house, as if he was addressing a dog or a child – "Well go along then, but don't stay too long".⁹ Only the narrator notices that the shadow actually does so and that it does not return. The savant does not discover his loss until the next day.

When he finds out about his departed shadow, his reaction is not wonder but embarrassment. It causes him great frustration to know that the incredible event that has occurred to him is prefigured in a story that everybody knew in his home country. With this hint Andersen pays homage to his own very obvious precursor, Adalbert de Chamisso's classic novella *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, or *The Man Who Sold his Shadow*, as a recent American translation renders the title. It had been published in German in 1814 and translated into Danish in 1841, six years in advance of Andersen's "The Shadow". The fame of

⁹ I am quoting from Faith Ingwersen's translation, which appeared in H. C. Andersen, *The Shadow and Other Tales*, (Madison, Wisc.: Dept. of Scandinavian Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1982) 23.

Chamisso's story is only a source of embarrassment for the poor protagonist of Andersen's tale: Not only is he bereft of his shadow but also in peril of facing charges back home for imitating *Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*. And he would be ashamed to imitate others, which is, we may note, exactly what a shadow is normally supposed to do. For the time being, the awkward state of affairs is solved, for after a few weeks in the sun the savant grows a new shadow and is able to return without further ado. The transformation that is later to befall him is, however, anticipated by this anxiety.

Many years lapse before the incident has further consequences. One evening back home the learned man receives a visit from a thin man, impeccably dressed and with an unmistakable air of distinction. The visitor turns out to be his former shadow, all dressed up and able to walk and talk and behave like a human being, in fact like a well-to-do person, flashing many tokens of prosperity. "To be sure, the shadow was extremely well dressed, and that was exactly what made it so very human", the narrator comments.¹⁰ Naturally, the savant is curious to know what had happened – how the shadow had been transformed. It had all happened in the warm countries, the shadow relates, in the strange house across the street, which the shadow had entered. For weeks the shadow had stayed in the anteroom and also managed to peek into the innermost room in the house where Poetry lived. This had been his key to absolute knowledge, which extends by far that of the learned man, whose erudition does not go beyond the theoretical spheres of the good, the true and the beautiful. He is obliged by the streetwise shadow to make a vow not to tell anybody about its past as a subordinate, which is to be kept secret for the sake of the shadow's present high standing. Like his former master, the shadow is aware of what other people might think of him and keen on keeping up appearances at any cost.

An interval of several years passes once again after this encounter before the shadow resurfaces in the scholar's life, asking him with great familiarity how he is doing. Not well, is the answer – for his treatises about the good, the true and the beautiful attract no audience or public attention. His efforts seem superfluous, his life seems pointless. As a measure against this feeling of despondency the shadow counsels him to take a journey and proposes that he should travel with him as a companion: "Will you come along as my shadow?" he asks, thus suggesting that they turn around the original relation between them. Even though the savant finds this suggestion rather offensive, he complies and goes along to a sanatorium with his former shadow to which he now serves as a surrogate shadow. There they meet a princess, who fancies the shadow for his luxurious habits. Especially, she is impressed by the splendor of having a shadow of such wisdom, which is permitted to roam freely. She decides to marry him.

Now, as the absolute top of society is within sight of the striving shadow, it becomes even more imperative that the learned man remains reticent on the real nature of their relationship. The shadow therefore attempts to strike an agreement with the learned man, asking him to keep pretending to be his shadow in exchange of a privileged position at the court. The learned man declines the offer and threatens to disclose the secret in accordance with a moral argument against the role playing that the shadow wants him to perform: "To do so would be to deceive the whole country and the king's daughter as well! I'll tell them everything; that I am a human being and that you are a shadow, that you are merely dressed up!"¹¹ The shadow's response to the threat is to have his former owner arrested and beheaded before the night of the wedding. When the shadow tells the princess about the peculiar idea that his crazy shadow had fostered, and

¹⁰ Ibid. 26.

¹¹ Ibid. 33.

how he had decided to take its life, she commends him for his humanity in dealing with the servant's insanity, regarding it as a charitable act to kill him.

II Perversions

The princess' praise of the execution as an act of mercy is only the last perversion out of a whole series of perversions. Almost everything in the story goes wrong and gets turned around or turned aside from the right course. This pattern is repeated on every level in this nightmarish vision of a world where social relationships and hierarchies are turned upside down, and where the copy succeeds in masquerading as the original. It is like watching a horror movie where a creepy character gets away with killing the good guy and is indeed celebrated for his misdeed. Things go wrong from the very beginning where the learned man discovers that his expectations of being able to stay outside in the south were a "mistake". Due to the southern climate, the circadian rhythm is reversed, so that one stays in at daytime and goes out at nighttime. Another perversion is the good-humored jest that inspires the shadow's separation, and yet another twisting is the princess' malady, which is that she sees too well, as if that could be a problem. And as if that is a reliable diagnose, when one takes into account her blatant inability to see that her fiancé is a shadow. On almost every level the events of the story defy conventional expectations and seem distorted, which is, of course, a reflection of the core scandal of the story: that a shadow breaks away from its parent object, dresses up as a human being, and eventually destroys its original referent.

Now, it is, of course, careless of me to talk about perversions here without making explicit what established norms that the story can be said to stray from. The degree to which the whole plot of "The Shadow" deviates from certain norms can be calculated more precisely by comparing it with the literary tradition from which the story originates. In his remarkable work *A Short History of*

the Shadow, the art historian Victor Stoichita has described a certain *topos* in European literature – established by medieval emblems and narratives – that depicts a guilt-ridden psycho-drama between a man and his shadow that has witnessed some misdeed committed by the man. The man therefore fights his shadow, which has come to embody an externalization of his bad conscience, causing him ultimately to commit suicide. Upon this conflict Stoichita remarks that it is "a blueprint that will thrive as part of our European culture. It was predominantly a favourite theme of romantic fiction, which has endured until now".¹² This, exactly, was also the theme that Andersen was working on, while twisting it delicately by turning the shadow into the destroyer of the savant, who had not incurred blame for anything. The "crime", for which the savant must pay with his life, is his knowledge of the shadow's embarrassing past as a subordinate to him. It is truthfulness and not deviousness that becomes the end of him. The scholar "was very kindhearted and most mild and amiable", the narrator assures us, and his actions in the tale give us no reason to doubt this.¹³

The cruelty of "The Shadow" will, in fact, become even more perceptible if the question of guilt is considered in comparison with Chamisso's story that belongs to the same literary tradition. The savant's blamelessness for the misfortune that befalls upon him is also a departure from *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*. Chamisso's novella is about the poor Schlemihl, who is tempted at a garden party to trade his handsome shadow to a man in grey, the devil himself, for a magic purse containing inexhaustible amounts of gold. The devil deftly detaches Schlemihl's shadow, folds it neatly together, puts it in his pocket and takes it with him. The profit that Schlemihl gains from the sale is limitless, and yet it cannot compensate for the stigmatization that his shadowlessness entails. It becomes a real curse when he falls in love with a girl, Mina,

¹² Victor Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997) 140.

¹³ Andersen, *The Shadow and Other Tales* 29.

to whom he cannot hide nor confide his secret. This causes a lot of trouble, and yet there is a happy ending to it, as he is saved in the end by Mina and a devoted servant, and there is, furthermore, a moral frame around the whole story in the shape of a preface admonishing humanity against selling your shadow to strange men at garden parties. *Schlemihl* is, pronouncedly, a moral tale, whereas Andersen's "The Shadow" is undeniably an immoral one.

Insight into the singular attainment of Andersen's tale can be gained by comparing it with *Schlemihl*. The strangest thing of all in Andersen's "The Shadow", the separation of man and shadow, is evidently transmitted from Chamisso. In *Schlemihl*'s case, the shadow gets turned into a commoditized and portable sign. Victor Stoichita has remarked upon this transaction that the "shadow is the very prototype of the immovable sign. It is undetachable from, coexistent and simultaneous with the object it duplicates. To suggest (and to perform) such an exchange, we must accept that it is 'exchangeable' and that it has an exchange value. We must therefore accept its reification".¹⁴ In Andersen's case, it works differently: It is not the reification of the shadow that we are asked to accept but the fact that it has taken on a life of its own. The agency that Andersen assigns to the shadow allows for the essential metamorphosis that takes place in the story, as a purely physical phenomenon is recast as a social one – as a power structure that gets turned around. The physical relationship between man and shadow is turned into a commercial relationship by Chamisso and further transfor-med into a social – and indeed reciprocal – relationship by Andersen. In Andersen's story, the demon is the shadow, a fiend in human shape. This is indeed the most fascinating aspect of the transformation of *Schlemihl's wundersame Geschichte* into "The Shadow": the way that Andersen's tale combines *Schlemihl* and the devil in the shadow character, which is,

¹⁴ Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* 170.

accordingly, both craving for acknowledgement and unscrupulous in its pursuit of it. Conversely, the savant is both less guilty and punished harder than *Schlemihl*: The occasion for his separation from his shadow is not that he sells it for profit but that he apostrophizes it amusingly.

III The Semiotics of the Shadow

Stoichita's observations on the semiotic nature of the shadow calls attention to the basic question of what a shadow is, in the first place. The simplest answer to this fundamental question that I have been able to find has been formulated by the art historian Michael Baxandall: a shadow, he writes, "is in the first instance a local, relative deficiency in the quantity of light meeting a surface".¹⁵ This relative deficiency in the quantity of light arises because a solid object of some kind gets in the way between the light source and the surface. The relationship between the object and the sign may thus be used to define what a shadow is, semiotically speaking. Let's say that the shadow-casting object is a human being, then the shadow both resembles the person and necessarily stands in physical relation to him or her.¹⁶ In terms borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce, this relationship may be described as being both iconic and indexical. It is an *icon* because it resembles the person, and it is an *index* because there needs to be a physical connection between the person and the shadow. The index "refers back to its object not so much because it is similar or analogous to it nor because it is associated with the general characteristics that this object happens to possess, but because it is dynamically (and spatially) connected with both the individual

¹⁵ Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 2.

¹⁶ Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* 15.

object on the one hand and on the other with the sense or memory of the person to which it serves as a sign of the other", Peirce writes.¹⁷

I single out the indexical relation here because it is this dynamic and spatial connection that is broken in Andersen's story of the shadow. The scandal of the story is the fact that the indexical sign emancipates itself from its parent object. This is not to say that the iconical aspect is not important. Indeed it is, for if the shadow had only been transformed into a fluffy, amorphous spectral being, bearing no resemblance to a human creature, it would have been ridiculous rather than spooky. But it is rather uncanny. And it is the uncanniness of the specific way in which this double is separated, the tearing apart of the indexical relation, which I want to take a closer look at. This separation of the shadow from the savant is, to be sure, a *special effect* that passes beyond belief and belongs to the domain of the imaginary: "I would never have believed that one's old shadow could come back as a human being", the savant says upon the return of the shadow, and we can easily indulge in his astonishment.¹⁸ Yet there is, I suppose, something about this transformation that would have seen uncannily familiar to a contemporary audience. I would therefore like to dwell upon this transformation for a moment.

IV Phantasmagoria

I would like to go back to this key moment of "The Shadow" and focus upon the whole setting where it takes place, on the balcony in the south where the savant contemplates his shadow move upon the opposite wall: "One evening the stranger was sitting on his balcony while the candle burned in the room behind him, and so it was quite natural, of course, that his shadow should make its way to the neighbor's wall", says the narrator at this stage where the relationship between

savant and shadow is still intact.¹⁹ As Jørgen Bonde Jensen has suggested, this whole projection scene on the balcony bears a strong resemblance to a particular form of popular entertainment known under the name of *Schattenspiel an der Wand* – shadow pictures upon the wall.²⁰ Anticipating slide shows, these spectacles were performed by traveling showmen, who projected transparent, painted slides upon the wall or upon a canvas mounted on the wall, while manipulating the slides so that the figures on the wall moved. In 1736 motion was introduced "on the screen by using a stationary slide as background and a moving one as a foreground".²¹ The projection of the shadow upon the opposite wall in Andersen's tale is parallel to these popular spectacles that had been fashionable since the late eighteenth century.

It is evident that Andersen had an interest in this kind of entertainment. Earlier, he had made extensive use of it as a metaphor for his mimetic aspirations in the travelogue *Shadow Pictures of a Journey to the Harz Mountains, etc., in the Summer of 1831* (1831), where he modestly explains in the prologue that "we do not mount any sheet on the wall, that would be too much trouble, we have the white sheets in the book where the pictures stand, only with loose strokes, to be sure, but one has to remember that these are only shadow pictures of reality".²² Hence, the pieces of paper in the book substitute for the canvas on the wall but should still be regarded as a surface upon which images appear – with loose strokes that the reader has to fill out with the aid of his or her own imagination. Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard had one of his pseudonyms make use

¹⁹ Ibid. 23.

²⁰ Jørgen Bonde Jensen, "Reisekammeraten Versus Skyggen," in *Forgyldning Forgår. Guldalderlæsninger* (Copenhagen: Babette, 1998) 135. The essay was originally printed in *KRITIK* no. 125/126 (1997).

²¹ Charles Joseph Singer and Trevor Illtyd Williams, *A History of Technology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), vol. 5, 736.

²² H.C. Andersen, *Skygebilleder af en Reise til Harzen, det sachsiske Schweitz etc. etc., i Sommeren 1831*, (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab/Borgen, 1986 (1831))

10. My translation [lhk].

¹⁷ Quoted from Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* 113.

¹⁸ Andersen, *The Shadow and Other Tales* 25.

of *Schattenspiel an der Wand* as a metaphor for his literary endeavor in a section of the first part of *Either/Or* (1843) entitled "Silhouettes". The pseudonymous character writing in the first part of *Either/Or*, the aesthete, presents a kind of literary slide show on the topic of reflective sorrow, which he evokes "in a few pictures" of some literary characters whose hearts are broken and minds are troubled, while he simultaneously expounds their misery. "I call them silhouettes", the aesthete explains, "partly to suggest at once by the name that draw them from the dark side of life and partly because, like silhouettes, they are not immediately visible. If I pick up a silhouette, I have no impression of it, cannot arrive at an actual conception of it; only when I hold it up toward the wall and do not look at it directly but at what appears on the wall, only then do I see it".²³ By way of this rather elaborate instruction in the technology of the *Schattenspiel* the aesthete describes the imaginative process involved in his psychological investigation.

The reason that Kierkegaard's aesthete gives for choosing the label *Skyggerids* for his psychological profiles is that they come from the "dark side of life". This comment is not only alluding to the technical negativity of the transparent slides – the reversal of light and shade on the slide – but also to the predominantly gothic content of these shadow picture shows, which often delved into the dark side of life and indeed probed the borders between life and death. This was especially the case with the so-called *phantasmagoria shows* – that is, public showings of supernatural apparitions. The defining feature of these shows was that the projector was concealed to the audience, or, as Jonathan Crary explains: "Phantasmagoria was a name for a specific type of magic-lantern performance in the 1790s and early 1800s, one that used back

projection to keep an audience unaware of the lanterns".²⁴ This was, of course, to heighten the illusion, as the showman called forth ghostly apparitions or dead people and imitated their voices and addressed them verbally. By hiding the magic lantern, these apparitions appeared to come out of nowhere.

The phantasmagoria shows were often referred to as a kind of *Schwartzkunst*, black magic, and the name of the apparatus itself – *laterna magica* or magic lantern – hints at the connection in the popular imagination between these shows and traditional sorcery.²⁵ The special appeal of the magic-lantern spectacles was, in fact, due to the sustained fluctuation between rational and irrational imperatives, between the evocations of ghostly presences and the denials that such beings existed. In her penetrating analysis of the phenomenon in the book *The Female Thermometer*, Terry Castle comments:

Producers of phantasmagoria often claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that the new entertainment would serve the cause of public enlightenment by exposing the frauds of charlatans and supposed ghost-seers. Ancient superstition would be eradicated when everyone realized that so-called apparitions were in fact only optical illusions. The early magic-lantern shows developed as mock exercises in scientific demystification complete with preliminary lectures on the fallacy of ghost-belief and the various cheats perpetrated by conjurers and necromancers over the centuries. But the pretense of pedagogy quickly gave way when the phantasmagoria itself began, for clever illusionists were careful never to reveal exactly how their own bizarre, sometimes frightening apparitions were produced. Everything was done, quite shamelessly, to intensify the supernatural effect. Plunged in darkness and assailed by unearthly sounds, spectators were subjected to an eerie, estranging, and ultimately baffling spectral parade. The illusion was apparently so convincing that surprised audience members sometimes tried to

23 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/or, Part I*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 3, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) 172-73.

24 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) 132.

25 See David Robinson, *The Lantern Image: Iconography of the Magic Lantern, 1420-1880* (Nutley, East Sussex, England: Magic Lantern Society, 1993).

fend off the moving "phantoms" with their hands or fled the room in terror. Thus even as it supposedly explained apparitions away, the spectral technology of the phantasmagoria mysteriously recreated the emotional aura of the supernatural²⁶

Such moving phantasms had only been available to the imagination before but now they could be observed with a thrill, as disbelief was momentarily suspended by the vividness of the moving shadows: "One knew ghosts did not exist, yet one saw them anyway, without knowing precisely how".²⁷ The shows were thus performed for amusement's sake but their effect was dependent upon the "what if" that accompanied the shows and added the necessary element of horror to the entertainment.

I believe that the pivotal point of the plot in Andersen's "The Shadow" – the separation of the shadow from the savant – alludes to the ultimate horror that the magic-lantern shows were hinting at: namely that the shadows upon the wall actually might come alive and detach themselves from the representational frame of the projection. The scene on the balcony in the south is indeed a sort of *Schattenspiel* where the artificial light, the candle in the room, comes from behind the savant and therefore is hidden from him. It is, in this respect, a phantasmagoria that he contemplates on the opposite wall where the diaphanous body of his shadow is moving, and, suddenly, upon his encouragement, is moving autonomously. The circumstances around the separation seem to support this link, for the *phantasmagoria shows* were only gambling with the devil, as the savant is when he apostrophizes the shadow and tells it to run off.²⁸ I suppose, in other words, that the shadow picture shows might have stimulated the animistic and

gothic semiotic fantasy of Andersen's "The Shadow", while simultaneously providing some of the imaginative resources that the story was drawing upon among the audience: that is, the excitement and anxiety about the moving image that might eventually take on a life of its own and turn into an autonomous force, as the shadow does.

V The Emancipation of Images

That Andersen's "Shadow" drew upon forces of a collective and historical nature can be inferred from the variations of the theme that can be found in Danish literature from the period. I will try to sustain my analysis by juxtaposing "The Shadow" with a few other texts – by Heiberg and Kierkegaard – from about the same time that share Andersen's vision of the emancipated image. A similar flight of the imagination can be found in a very influential piece on aesthetic theory from 1838 with the title "Painting in Relation to the Other Beautiful Arts" by Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Heiberg was a playwright, a hard core Hegelian and the commanding aesthete of Danish Golden Age literature. He was a critic, whom Andersen both admired and feared and read avidly. I want to quote an excerpt that describes a semiotic emancipation that is strikingly similar to the one that takes place in "The Shadow", which appears among Heiberg's considerations of portrait painting and the problem of how to extract an ideal image of the phenomenal human being who is being portrayed. This process is described by Heiberg in terms of Christian eschatology, which is applied in a merely figurative sense. The artist was meant to perform a kind of aesthetic resurrection, Heiberg believed, by giving the object a new transfigured body, so to speak, that would take place of the phenomenal one.²⁹ This instruction

26 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer. Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny, Ideologies of Desire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 143-144.

27 Ibid. 144.

28 See Jørgen Bonde Jensen's acute remarks on the savant's shadow play as a distracted play with fire ("Reisekammeraten Versus Skyggen," in *Forgyldning Forår* 135.

29 Heiberg's intervention is intertwined with the contemporary controversy of the immortality of the soul in Danish intellectual life. In *Sjælen efter døden: Guldalderens moderne gennembrud* (Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 2007, in press) I analyze the ways in which

inspired Heiberg to imagine how these transfigured images could be released from their objects and float around freely:

For, if beauty in general is the image of reality, which as an outer surface, is attached on it, then let us imagine for a moment that all these images detached themselves from the reality ["Virkelighed"] upon which they rest, as tones do from the strings, and fluttered around freely, but without vanishing as tones do: then beauty would be liberated from its phenomenal condition on earth and find itself situated among the blessed spirits. To human beings the resurrection of the body would thus consist in the emancipation of the image from its material substratum³⁰

The strong idealism of Heiberg's aesthetic vision is identifiable by its fundamental gesture toward the materiality of the signifier. The scandal of art was its embeddedness in empirical matter, which is, of course, all the more conspicuous in the case of the visual arts. Heiberg dreamed of emancipating images from their materiality, but, ironically, his vision of immaterial images that would flutter around like butterflies seems heavily inspired by the aesthetic hardware available to his age: that is, the magic-lantern shows, which were, in reality, able to produce immaterial images of the kind that Heiberg imagines. Heiberg's theoretical vision is remarkably related to the semiotic nightmare that occurs in Andersen's "The Shadow", which is precisely about the emancipation of the image "from its material substratum", as Heiberg writes in his more affirmative account of what would happen if images became autonomous forces. Again, I am not arguing that Heiberg's article on aesthetic theory served as a direct source of inspiration to Andersen, although it is indisputable that he was familiar with it. I am quoting it in order to demonstrate that the flight of the imagination

Danish aesthetic thinking and literary practices were reformed and divided during these years by this controversy.

30 Johan Ludvig Heiberg, "Om Malerkunsten i dens Forhold til andre skjønnne Kunster" in *Perseus. Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 2 (1838) 172. My translation [lhk].

taking place in "The Shadow" was not a peculiar idea to Andersen but current in both in contemporary Danish literature and popular imagination.

That this is the case is further demonstrated in Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* from 1843. The second part of Kierkegaard's famous work contains a lengthy argument in favor of "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" where the ethical judge Wilhelm blames his friend, the aesthete from the first part of *Either/Or*, for his aesthetic vision of human existence. I have no interest, here, in the clash between these two outlooks on life that Kierkegaard is staging in *Either/Or*. I am merely interested in the analogies that the judge uses to condemn his lost friend. In particular, the judge blames the aesthete for his obsession with the moment, especially the magic moment of romantic love, at the expense of those virtues and delights that are not temporally designed to culminate in a moment, but lasts and grows and matures over the course of a whole life, such as marriage is supposed to do. The aesthete's sense of totality has disintegrated into a wealth of interesting details – as for instance an erotically charged *Blickwechseln* with a young girl in a mirror – which he registers and saves for later enjoyment.

This habit is described and condemned by the judge by way of two interesting metaphors that bring both *Schattenspiel* and Chamisso's story about Peter Schlemihl into connection with each other and, furthermore, with the new photographic technique known as daguerreotypy: "You preserve such things as accurately and as swiftly as a daguerreotype, which, as is generally known, takes only a half-minute even in the poorest weather", the judge writes to the aesthete, while showing that he is updated on the latest developments of this technology that had recently reduced the exposure time drastically. We should note that the little insert "as is generally known" testifies to the common knowledge of this fact. The pleasure that the aesthete takes from observing and memorizing such moments is described by the judge as a kind of theft: "You [...] actually live by

plundering; unnoticed, you creep up on people, steal from them their happy moment, their most beautiful moment, stick this shadow picture in your pocket as the tall man did in Schlemihl and take it out whenever you wish".³¹ That is how the judge states the case against his friend, as he unexpectedly changes the metaphor from the daguerreotype to the shadow picture slide.

The analogy that the judge makes between the aesthete's way of life and the story of Peter Schlemihl entails an important change in relation to the source. One recalls that it is not a shadow picture slide that the devil of *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* obtains and folds together and carries in his pocket – it is Schlemihl's soul. The soul has been substituted for such a slide in this excerpt from *Either/Or*, which shows you how Chamisso's story provided a narrative model for grasping and fantasizing about these visual technologies that are evidently regarded as continuous in the judge's discourse. In only a few pages the daguerreotype has changed into a *Schattenbild* in the judge's metaphorical description of the aesthete's social behavior. What the two technologies – *Schattenspiel* and daguerreotypy – have in common is, obviously, that they allude to the permanence and the portability of the aesthete's memory images, but the reproachful attitude with which the judge regards the aesthete's interaction with other people also associates these technologies with a certain extent of thievishness. This is attested to by the word "plunder" ["stjæler"], which suggests that the aesthete robs people of valuables by forcible means. There seems to be something unethical – or even criminal – not only about the aesthete's activities, but also about the technologies that his activities are compared to. The shift between them in the second part of *Either/Or* provides us

31 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/or, Part II*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. IV, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) 10.

with a hint on what is going on in Andersen's story about the savant and his emancipated shadow.

VI The Semantics of Image and Self

The way that the daguerreotype is compared to Schlemihl's shadow and later, imperceptibly, transformed into a *Schattenbild* in Kierkegaard's discourse provides us with a hint why the idea of the emancipated image recurred so frequently at the time. The texts that I have glossed upon were all written in the early days of photography, at a time when knowledge of the daguerreotype was gaining ground. It was this technology that made it relevant to talk about the image as something that may "stick" to a person and become "detached" or even "stolen" from him or her. It introduced a new language for talking about the relation between self and image. The point of photographic pictures is that this physical connection can be broken, and the indexical sign be released from its referent and circulate and proliferate freely. The semiotic rupture envisioned by Heiberg and Kierkegaard, and turned into a nightmare in "The Shadow", is, in fact, the standard procedure of photography, which emancipates the image from its indexical obligations. A shadow is, as we know, a combination of an icon and an index, and so were the photographic pictures invented by Louis Daguerre. Every photograph is, in the words of Rosalind Krauss, "the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object".³²

32 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985) 203. Peirce himself also lived in the age of photography and was able to categorize this new representational practice: "Photographs [...] are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection"

"The Shadow" can thus be regarded as a disturbing dramatization of the new semantics surrounding the relationship between image and self.³³ With the invention of photography indexical images became able to take on a life of their own and survive the referent, like the shadow does in Andersen's story. A photograph captures us in a moment and thus also reminds us of our timely existence, which will surely come to an end one day, whereas the picture is able to live on. This spectral quality has later become a key issue in the theory of photography, as for instance in Roland Barthes' memorable phrase of the "micro-version of death" one experiences by being photographed: "I am truly becoming a spectre".³⁴ This is the reminder that the scholar receives from the shadow, which upon its first return explains him that it felt "a sort of longing [...] to see you once more before you die; after all, you will die, sir!", presupposing, conversely, that the shadow itself is immortal. Viewed in this context, "The Shadow" lets us discover some of the unconscious fears and anxieties that came along with the new technology. It stages the emancipation of images taking place in contemporary visual culture, as a new economy of signs was being established, and it gives us a glimpse of the traumatic implications of this modern condition.

(quoted from W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 60.

33 This connection has also been discovered by Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, who has suggested that one can read "Andersen's Märchen durchaus als Allegorie auf das Verhältnis – oder auch Mißverhältnis – von Individuum und dessen (öffentlichem) Bild" ("Der Spiegel und seine Schatten. Abdrücke der frühen Photographie in Texten von Aa. O. Vinje, Henrik Ibsen und H. C. Andersen" in *Zwischen Text und Bild. Zur Funktionalisierung von Bildern in Texten und Kontexten*, eds. Annegret Heitmann and Joachim Schiedermair, Freiburg: Rombach, 2000, 36).

34 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 13-14.

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