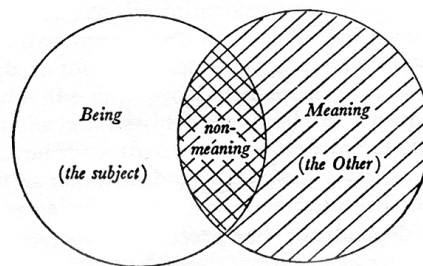


**On Susan Morris,  
or, the Shadow of the Object**

**Margaret Iversen**

In his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud used a metaphor to capture in language the feeling of loss and pain that one feels when a loved person dies or otherwise departs. While successful mourning involves gradually severing one's attachments to the dead, unsuccessful mourning, melancholia, involves clinging to the object so closely that the ego becomes identified with it. In the case of the melancholic subject, as Freud so eloquently put it, it is as if 'the shadow of the object fell upon the ego'.<sup>1</sup> This figure of speech suggests a partial eclipse of the subject. Like the moon darkened by the shadow cast by Earth, the bereaved person feels marked by a dark spot, a lack. Freud was specifically referring to the pathological condition of melancholia, but the figure connecting trauma, loss, death and shadows has a long poetic tradition and wider implications. It was, for instance, an image taken up by Lacan to describe the very constitution of the subject.

Lacan invoked Freud's metaphor of the eclipsed subject when, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar XI), he discussed the precariousness of the subject caught up in the field of meaning, or what he also called the symbolic order. He stressed the way language imposes itself from outside like a traumatic blow. The imposition of language carves out a sort of residue, 'the real', which thereafter threatens the stability of subject's position. Language, by this account, involves trauma and loss for the subject. Indeed, the subject must negate himself as real, as being, in order to accede to meaning. Entry into the symbolic implies, then, the fading or vanishing of the subject in the register of the real: 'Hence the division of the subject – when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as "fading", as disappearance.'<sup>2</sup> Appealing to set theory, Lacan presents a diagram of two slightly overlapping circles, the mutually exclusive domains of 'meaning' and 'being', intersecting to form a middle domain of 'non-meaning'. One way of interpreting this diagram might be to suggest that the entry into language creates a pocket of nonsense that is crucial to the identity of the subject.

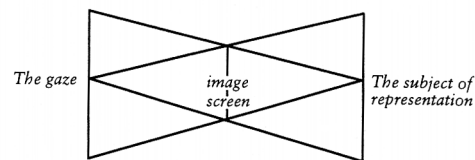


In the same seminar, Lacan presented a diagram of the subject's relation to vision. He compared the conscious subject's sense of this relation with the model of geometric perspective, represented by a simple triangle. The point of view that the perspectively constructed painting gives to the subject is the illusion that he is the centre and origin of meaning: 'I see the world.' But, Lacan insisted, the subject is also the object of a disconcerting outside gaze that seems to look back at him. In order to fully diagram the subject's relation to vision, then, one must superimpose an inverted triangle on the first. This shows the subject caught up in a gaze that does not at all conform to the strictures of perspectival vision; the criss-crossing of lines in the diagram is meant to show the resulting visual confusion. The eye could imagine itself master of all it surveyed were it not for this spot or void that persists outside the normal strictures of meaning and vision. Because it is an intimate part of

1 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917 [1915]), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.14, London: Hogarth Press, 1971, p.258.

2 *Ibid.*, p.218.

myself, projected outside, this spot becomes the object of the scopic drive; it is what I search for in looking, even though the encounter with it is wounding.<sup>3</sup> When language fails, when vision blanks, it is because 'being' is casting its shadow on 'meaning'.



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Freud's and Lacan's accounts of the traumatic constitution of the subject – and their metaphors of shadow, eclipse and fading – together provide a framework for thinking about Susan Morris's work. She gives us a lead in this by recounting a key memory from her childhood:

When I was between nine and ten years old, glancing at my father's newspaper, I stumbled across an image that shocked me. Since then, every time I am reminded of this incident, I experience a sort of panic. It is as if a piece of my self 'cuts out' – my mind goes completely blank. This evocation has echoed through the years; as a kind of recurrent forgetfulness, it is both the event and figure on which my practice is based.

What I saw in the newspaper, all those years ago, were two photographs accompanying an article on the effects of 'drug-taking' on a spider. Two different photographs side-by-side, two different 'instances' of the creature: one before and one after it had eaten a fly laced with LSD. The spider itself was in neither image, represented instead – or, defined, perhaps – by her web: one perfect and the other (after the drug-taking) a chaotic shambles.<sup>4</sup>

This traumatic incident is clearly a case when the shadow of the object (the chance sight of a photograph at an impressionable age) 'fell upon' the subject. The incident is recalled but its meaning is a blank. Morris says that 'it is both event and figure on which my practice is based', yet her art practice inverts the process. In her work, it is the shadow of the subject that falls on the (art) object.

How does one go about finding artistic means that have the contingency of trauma? How can one make a mark that issues from the being of the subject? In short, how to make a mark the way an object casts a shadow? The marks made must somehow be involuntary in order to bypass consciousness. They must be impersonally determined, as if they came from elsewhere, automatically, perhaps, like the instinctual spinning of the spider's web. The image of the web provides a striking parallel to Morris's working practice because it is both involuntary – spun out of the essential being of the spider – and diagrammatic.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that Roland Barthes's account of the effect of the photographic punctum owes a great deal to Lacan's theory of the gaze. See R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard), New York: Hill and Wang, 1981; and Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan), New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1981. See also my 'What is a Photograph?', *Art History*, vol.17, no.3, 1993, pp.101–18; expanded version in M. Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

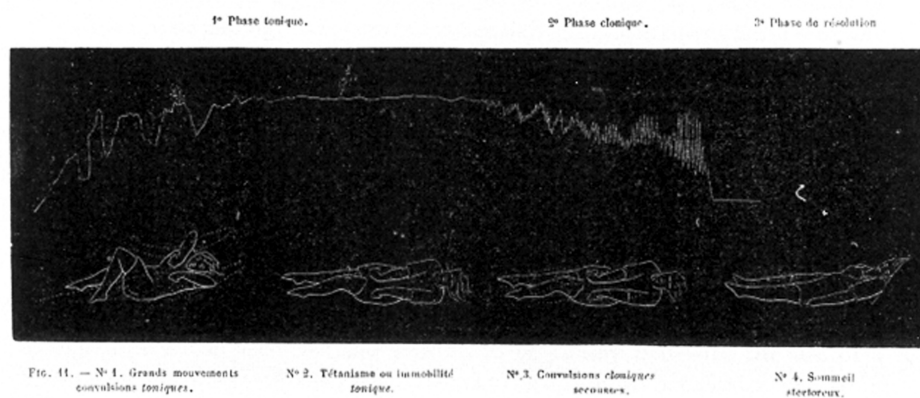
<sup>4</sup> Susan Morris, *On the Blank: Photography, Drawing and Writing*, Ph.D. Dissertation, London: University of The Arts, 2007, p.8.

In preparation for an ongoing series of works, Morris wore a black watch on her wrist, a watch without face or hands. The device, called an 'acti-watch', records intensity and duration of movement, and is used, for example, by chronobiologists to track sleep disturbances. The acti-watch's data is used to create graphs that are indexical traces of a subject's periods of waking and sleeping; they chart graphically, in multi-coloured displays, periods of 'being' and 'fading' over time. Dr. Katherina Wulff, a researcher at Oxford with whom Morris collaborates, has described our sleep patterns as being akin to our fingerprints: unique and individual. Morris presents these graphs exactly as they come from the lab, titling them according to the rough duration of time recorded and her location during it. As she remarks, 'the bright colours are the trace of my activity "in the world" and the dark areas (the shadows) are when I'm "out of it", sleeping and, quite probably, dreaming'. It is possible to think of this work in relation to automatic writing – or drawing – and to consider the graphs as involuntary, diagrammatic, displaced self-portraits.

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Morris's inquiry into electro-mechanical devices for visualizing a body's physical states takes up a longer history of scientific investigation that stretches back to the mid-nineteenth-century invention of graphic techniques for tracking and recording invisible physiological or psychological activity. The early machines consisted of a rotating drum wrapped in paper and a stylus that responded to some slight movement or stimulus. The resulting graphic illustration of variation over time appeared, amongst other places, in the pages of Charcot's famous *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876–80) alongside photographs and drawings documenting hysterical attacks.

PÉRIODE ÉPILEPTOÏDE DE L'ATTAQUE HYSTÉRO-ÉPILEPTIQUE. (Tracé schématique.)



'Epileptic phase of a hysterical attack.' Paul Richer, *Études cliniques sur l'hystéro-épilepsie ou grande hystérie* (1885).

The history of the development of these scientific devices and their reception by the Surrealists is the subject of a fascinating article by David Lomas, 'Modest recording instruments': Science, Surrealism and Visuality', connecting the Surrealist practice of artistic automatism with the rise of these

technologies.<sup>5</sup> One motivation for this importation of the scientific graphic trace into the visual image was that it provided a means of representing the dimension of time. The desire to represent more dynamic and temporal phenomena can clearly be seen in Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), a painting indebted to Étienne-Jules Marey's scientific technique of chronophotography. (Marey was, incidentally, also involved in the invention of the sphygmograph, a gadget that was attached to the wrist to measure the pulse – an early prototype of the acti-watch.)

Another important implication of the invention of these devices was that the human observer of phenomena was replaced by a machine. For artists and writers associated with the Surrealist movement, this impersonal automatism served as a model to be imitated. In fact, Lomas's title is taken from the Surrealist manifesto of 1924, the essay that formally founded the group. In a discussion of the successes and failures of attempts at automatic writing, Breton complains that most writers are too full of pride: 'But we, who have made no effort to filter, who in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, *modest recording instruments* who are not mesmerized by the drawings we are making, perhaps we serve an even nobler cause.'<sup>6</sup>

Lomas offers some excellent examples of the Surrealists' appreciation of the graphic trace, including a collage by Max Ernst and a Salvador Dalí etching. He does not mention a remarkable, if late, example of the genre: a series of three electrocardiograms made in 1966 by Brian O'Doherty and titled *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*. O'Doherty, well-known for his book on the ideology of the gallery space, *Inside the White Cube*, sidesteps the conventions of portraiture in favour of drawings made by a machine that translated automatically Duchamp's heartbeat – its speed and regularity – into a jagged series of peaks and troughs. This drawing obviously does not resemble the person whose heartbeat it records. Rather, it is an indexical trace, mediated by an electro-mechanical device, of one of his vital functions. The machine thus functions analogously to a camera – automatically registering certain aspects of the world that would otherwise remain invisible to the human eye.

Lomas perhaps underplays the discrepancy between nineteenth-century scientists' interest in the graphic trace that seemed to deliver the full legibility of the body and its functions, and the quite different concerns of the Surrealist artists with the temporal axis, which they thought of as a non-spatial fourth dimension. These interests, coupled with the negation of authorial agency, are also Morris's concerns, and what emerges from her practice is the 'intermittence' of the self – its memory blanks and involuntary recollections, its fluctuating presence and absence.

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The Surrealist critique of authorial and artistic agency is the theme of Denis Hollier's essay 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows'. Surrealist autobiographical writing, he claims, amounted to 'the search for what, in literary space, would be the equivalent of what a shadow is in pictorial space; an index that makes the work lose all virtuality'.<sup>7</sup> Automatic writing had a brief efflorescence in the early 1920s, but the fundamental aim of evading authorial agency and artistic convention was enduring. In his article, Hollier considers the cast shadow as exemplary of the type of sign admired by the Surrealists, noting that it is the clearest example of an index that is 'less a representation

5 David Lomas, 'Modest recording instruments': Science, Surrealism and Visuality,' *Art History*, vol.27, no.4, September 2004, pp.627–50.

6 André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), in Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (ed. and trans.), *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969, pp.27–28.

7 Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows' (trans. Rosalind Krauss), *October* 69, Summer, 1994, p.124.

of an object than the effect of an event'.<sup>8</sup> The literary equivalent of the cast shadow, he says, is the first person. Just as the cast shadow indicates the object, the I is an index of the subject of enunciation: 'The I opens up language to its performative circumstances. The unfolding of Breton's autobiographical texts, such as *Nadja* (1928), was just as much unanticipated by the author as it was for the reader.'<sup>9</sup> Both *follow* the narrative.

Apparently contradicting this first-person, performative strategy, Breton recommends that the writer maintain as objective or neutral an attitude as possible. For example, in *L'Amour fou* (*Mad Love*, 1937), Breton recommended recording experiences as in a medical report: 'No incident should be omitted, no name altered, lest the arbitrary make its appearance.'<sup>10</sup> In the 1962 introduction to *Nadja*, he claims to have adopted a tone 'as impersonal as possible', like that of a neuropsychiatrist.<sup>11</sup> For him, the realist novel suffers from a paucity of reality. Breton's texts, by contrast, have characters who exist and who have proper names. The first person, in this context, is not an expressive subject, but one who reports without fictitious elaboration. The books are also liberally 'illustrated' with photographs. Hollier suggests that, along with the first person and narrative inconclusiveness, they effect an 'indexation of the tale'.

Susan Morris touches on these ideas when she discusses the importance for her work of W.G. Sebald's writing, especially his book *The Rings of Saturn*, which, as Morris has noted, is punctuated by uncaptioned photographs and narrated by an 'I' that migrates through different speakers. In this text, Sebald refers to 'King Solomon's treatise on the shadow cast by our thoughts, *De Umbris Idearum*'.<sup>12</sup> The book is mentioned only in passing, but the thoughts connected to it seem to resurface later, when he describes pages from a seventeenth-century silk pattern book as having 'an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty *as if they had been produced by Nature itself*, like the plumage of birds'.<sup>13</sup> It is the idea of a kind of mark produced as if 'by nature' that attracts Morris, who has also pointed out that Sebald's allusion to plumage recalls Lacan's Seminar IX, when he writes of Matisse's astonishment at a slow motion film of himself painting. The film revealed to Matisse that his many gestures were directed by what Lacan suggests was 'not choice, but something else', adding, 'if a bird were to paint would it not be by letting fall its feathers?'<sup>14</sup>

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The camera, another modest recording instrument, captures the graphic trace in an impersonal way, revealing a world otherwise invisible to the eye. Walter Benjamin called the world revealed by close-up or stop-motion photography the 'optical unconscious'. But the sort of imperceptible natural phenomena he had in mind, such as the legs of a horse at full gallop, is not what Morris's work aims to capture. Her practice is closer in conception to Benjamin's remarks in 'Little History of Photography', when he discusses the photographic self-portrait of Karl Dauthendey and his fiancée who would later kill herself. He describes how we search the photograph as if the camera were able to record the trace left by the original trauma, making it possible for us to predict retrospectively the future disaster:

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8 *Ibid.*, p.115.

9 *Ibid.*, p.129.

10 A. Breton, *Mad Love* (trans. Mary Ann Caws), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987, p.39.

11 A. Breton, 'Avant-dire (dépêche retardée)', *Nadja*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p.5. (My translation.)

12 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (trans. Michael Hulse), London: The Harvill Press, London, p.272.

13 *Ibid.*, p.283 (My italics).

14 J. Lacan, *op. cit.*, p.114. Lacan is commenting on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of Matisse in his book *Signes* (1960).

No matter how artful the photograph, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.<sup>15</sup>

The camera's blind mechanism, Benjamin suggests, renders it incapable of censoring the 'inconspicuous spot':

For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: other above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.<sup>16</sup>

Roland Barthes was deeply impressed by these passages when he wrote *Camera Lucida* (1980), a book of key importance for Morris. Although she only rarely uses photography, her work touches on what Barthes calls 'mad realism', which has nothing to do with imitation or resemblance. Especially in the current era of the rise of photographic digitalisation, in which the value once set on the indexicality of the medium is now giving way to a manipulated pictorial model, Morris searches for a mode of mark-making that retains the paradoxical quality of an indexical trace of a (past) presence – a presence invaded by absence and loss. Morris's year planner series, for example, is derived from a regular practice of recording on a calendar days of presence and absence in her studio, marking the fluctuations not of physical, but of psychic presence. The resulting diagrammatic prints thus create diagrams of positive and negative space, rhythms of colour punctuated by blanks, or unmarked zones. Similarly, her recent work done with a carpenter's plumb line is the result of a repetitive and mechanical process that gradually fills the large sea of white paper, marking it automatically, systematically – marking time, intermittently. The variations in the notations over time and their inhuman character also suggest the variations of the mechanical lines of the graphic trace.

Morris's repetitive, intense work on the plumb line drawings has very recently inspired a new series that aims to capture the unconscious time, rhythm and movement of her working process. These new 'motion capture drawings' are made in a studio that has the technical apparatus required to track movement as a graphic trace. She wears sensors on her wrists and on the back of her head as she goes about tacking up the plumb line at the top of a large sheet of paper, snapping the string on the paper to leave the chalk mark and then winding up the string. The beautiful rhythm of the movement is shown in the resulting picture as a complex tangle of white lines on a black ground. While the result might be compared to Jackson Pollock's large canvases, the process is much closer to Marey's chronophotography.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to bear in mind the difference between Marey's strict adherence to chronological time and Morris's rather different use of the graphic trace which, like the Surrealists', opens up a time of reverie outside of meaning.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' (1931), in Marcus Bullock, Michael Jennings, et al., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2 1927–1934*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p.510.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.510.

<sup>17</sup> Francois Dagonet, *Étienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace* (trans. Robert Galeta), New York: Zone Books, 1992.