

Silhouettes, Shadows and Masks as Thinking Models (Florence, 27–28 Jan 25)

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut, Florence, Jan 27–28, 2025
Deadline: Nov 15, 2024

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Silhouettes, Shadows and Masks as Thinking Models: Reflecting with Fanon, Mbembe, and Mudimbe.

A Transdisciplinary Study Day at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (27–28 January 2025), organized by Hana Gründler und Rosa Sancarolo; Research Group “Ethico-Aesthetics of the Visual”

In his seminal investigation on the psychological, individual and social impacts of colonialism on people of African descent (*Peau Noire, Masques Blanc*, 1952; translated to *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967), Frantz Fanon centralized the signifying value of the experience of vision: of viewing and of being viewed. The author insightfully stressed how this dialectical optical interaction, departed from and projected onto the site of the body, fundamentally contributes to constructing assumptions of a supposed “otherness” (p. 111-112, of the 1986 edition by Pluto Press). The so described dialectical phenomenon of vision involves notions of Blackness, shadows, masks, projections, and reduction. A series of concepts, and their accompanying visualizations, that are fundamentally constitutive of the motif of the silhouette, a visual, technical, conceptual and last but not least political site of obfuscation, opacity, and suspension of appearances and identities, beyond the enunciative trace of its contouring outline.

More implicitly or more explicitly, adopting the visual paradigm of the silhouette as a thinking model has been pursued also by other leading intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century and, especially, in Postcolonial Studies. Achille Mbembe for example employs the motif of the silhouette as symbol for a captured identity in *Critique of Black Reason* (2013). Valentine-Yves Mudimbe instead discerns from the silhouette a figure of “ethical perturbation”, responsibility and reconciliation in and around the race-based violence in his essay “Debitores Summus...On Ways of Exhausting Our Question on Violence” (2014).

Thinking with and building on these critical positions, we want to reflect further together on the different ways in which the visual and conceptual paradigm of the silhouette and its related concepts such as shadow and mask have been adopted and re-signified as kaleidoscopic thinking models by thinkers like Mbembe and Mudimbe, and artists like Kara Walker, William Kentridge, and Belkis Ayon, to name but a few. What language do the above-mentioned authors use in order to question the violent dimensions of the paradigm of otherness? What is the importance of figurative language and aesthetic experience in this rethinking of corporeality and identity? More gen-

erally speaking, we aim to reflect upon, question, and/or dismantle philosophical and art-historical episodes, experiences, and narratives of colonialism and oppression, negotiation and contestation, empowerment and resistance.

We welcome papers from art history, history, literature and philosophy, and related fields that shed light on the above-mentioned concepts and questions, or focus on single case studies.

Papers should not exceed 20 minutes and will be followed by a discussion.

Please send title, abstract (max. 2000 characters) and a short bio summarized in one PDF-document to rosa.sancarolo@khist.uzh.ch and paul.schneider@khi.fi.it by 15 November 2024.

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Reference:

CFP: Silhouettes, Shadows and Masks as Thinking Models (Florence, 27-28 Jan 25). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 18, 2024 (accessed Dec 26, 2024), <<https://arthist.net/archive/42958>>.