



A DETAIL OF TOMÁS SARACENO'S A THERMODYNAMIC IMAGINARY, INSPIRED IN PART BY PLATO'S CAVE ALLEGORY, IN WHICH THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHER DESCRIBES THE HUMAN CONDITION AS FOREVER BOUND TO THE IMPRESSIONS THAT WE RECEIVE THROUGH THE SENSES, OR SHADOWS, AS OPPOSED TO AN IDEAL, BRIGHT REALM OF PURE FORMS AND FACTS

A shadow sun

'For over 2,000 years, we have been living with a shadow sun for our guiding star,' writes philosopher Michael Marder, a frequent collaborator of Tomás Saraceno, referring to our reliance on Western metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that concerns itself with natural laws that lie beyond human experience. The light of reason, as it is known, has enabled human progress, but also driven us to privilege abstract concepts - notably, monetary value under capitalism - over visible, tangible things. So how can we correct our course and come back to the physical world? Here, Marder points to Saraceno's immersive installations as a guiding force, unveiling the deeper truths behind the artist's play on light and shadows

The unmitigated disaster that is Western metaphysics, which has led to a global environmental crisis, may be neatly summarised as follows: for over 2,000 years, we have been living with a shadow sun for our guiding star. We have not been living in the shadows impenetrable to sunlight, but rather, in the orbit of a shadow sun.

Plato, who systematised and gave philosophical credence to extant myths of the Sun God, makes this point clear in *The Republic*: the other sun is the idea of the good. The sun makes vision possible, while it is itself impossible to look at with unprotected eyes; the idea of the good makes all other ideas possible, while it cannot itself be thought. So there are really two suns, Plato implies: one illuminating the world accessible to our ocular sense, the other showering the world with the light of reason. The second of the two is the true sun, more original than the celestial body. His take-home lesson is that we must stop trusting our senses and learn to see reality otherwise, orienting ourselves not by the physical but by the metaphysical sun.

Since the dawn of the European Enlightenment, the goal of philosophy has been to spread the nets of universal reason: the same for everyone, in any part of the world, at any time, regardless of context, lived experience, and identity. The light of reason was ideally even and uniform, with human progress measured by how brightly it shone on various parts of the Earth.

The glorification of reason coincided with, and was buttressed by, the infamous mind-body split postulated by Descartes, who considered eyesight inferior to the disembodied rational vision of reality. So, the metaphysical light of reason eclipsed physical light.

The shadow sun is bizarre, and so is everything that unfolds under it. While eyesight relies on a constant play of light and shadow to do its work properly, the vision of reason supposes a true, shadowless luminosity. When it comes to bodily sight, the shady areas of an object and its shadow define what is visible and give it perspectival depth. Shadows mark the finitude of light - a metaphor for our finite existence. Depending on the angle at which a ray falls, as well as on the variable standpoints of the object and the spectator, a shadow would dance, its length indicating the time of day based on the position of the sun vis-à-vis the earth. The minutest event will be, in this way, encrusted into a cosmic drama, pointing back to the alignment of our planet and its star, our senses and experiences.

In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, theatre is the appearance of mere shadows, and all appearance is the shadow theatre of true being. The underground realm of the cave is not, after all, qualitatively different from the cosmic theatre; only the scale and extent of their respective light sources and moving shadows vary. The cold and sterile luminosity of metaphysics, in turn, >>

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is shadowless, untethered at once from shadows and the objects that cast them. Given this double separation, the play of light and shadow also ceases. One can no longer tell what time it is on the clock of existence, and for a good reason: there are no shadows, short or long, emanating from Plato's ideal objects. Does shadowlessness not account, if only in part, for Plato's designation of ideas as unchangeable and eternal?

The act of freeing shadows from objects and from light threatens to transform our world into a vast collection of phantoms. The insubstantial becomes substantial and starts leading a life of its own. Metaphysics, in effect, uses the nature of the shadows to cement its stature. Ideas are shadows unglued from, and presumed more genuine than, portions of actual existence. The intangible subject is deemed truer than mere substance. And that which appears before the senses is interpreted as an apparition, a confounding and mendacious ghost. Our fragile, ever incomplete, finite reality turns out to be a lie so long as it is illuminated by the shadow sun.

In the name of true being, unperturbed by any empirical event, philosophers have not hesitated to sacrifice the entire world. Yet, their theoretical desire has been bolstered by economics, in particular by the logic of capital. I could say that capitalism is the continuation of metaphysics by other means, because the value of anything and anyone whatsoever is a shadow that grows more significant than the valued being itself. An economic system born of and befitting two millennia of metaphysics, it finally musters enough resources to destroy the liveable planet, having ushered in the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. Besides the unofficial shadow economies (that is, the black markets), capitalism is a monstrous shadow economy that keeps growing while the majority of the global population is impoverished. Detached from need, serving not its human participants but the augmentation of capital, it precisely replicates the untethering of shadows from light and from the objects in its path. In capitalism, as in philosophy, everything visible and tangible is a lie. The truth of capitalism is in the non-sensuous workings of abstract, quantitatively determined value.

The shadow sun of metaphysics, not least in its economic manifestation, has overshadowed the Earth and its sun. How to emerge out of the shadow that claims for itself the status of pure light? How to come back to the physical world, woven out of an interplay of lights and shadows?

Nietzsche recommends the revaluation of all values, a project that puts in question the very value of value. It would be insufficient to invert the scale and to put the shadow sun in its rightful place below the sun of astronomy. We ought to question the hierarchy, which presumes a vertical axis with one thing above and the other below. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes: 'The true world is gone: which world is left? The illusory one, perhaps? But no! We got rid of the illusory world along with the true one!' The play of lights and shadows was only an illusion from the standpoint of the now-demolished static and utterly luminous conception of truth. The conclusion that both worlds disappear does not herald a wholesale destruction of real and ideal being but the inescapable necessity of learning to see and think anew, with and from the shadows.

Notice that Nietzsche is reluctant to equate the moment of truth, when the 'true world' is revealed as

the biggest lie, with total enlightenment. However energetically a hypercritical reason smashes the old idols, however bright its light, such reason will belong together with what it destroys, unless it admits shadows – minimal, and yet irreducible – into its midst.

With his thesis, Nietzsche provides the first clue to an answer to our questions about the shadow sun of metaphysics. As long as there is meaning, as long as we make sense of the world, this meaning and this sense will be the world's shadows. The point is to live as though it is always midday, keeping semantic shadows as close as possible to the things that cast them, keeping them short.

Metaphysics has not only lengthened the shadows of meaning beyond belief, nor reversed the values of these shadows and the objects that cast them. It has also lent independent existence to the double, cut off from the thing it duplicates. Metaphysics requires dissociation from space and time: it ensures the reign of permanent daylight in one hemisphere of being (above) and a never-ending polar night in the other (below), so much so that darkness passes for non-being. Those who have moved on from metaphysics refrain from choosing between meaning and reality, thought and the world. Instead, they observe and participate in the play of lights and shadows staged in the theatre of being.

In the visual field, the shortest shadow is pierced with light. Translucent, nearly transparent shadows, such as those populating Tomás Saraceno's *A Thermodynamic Imaginary*, occupy the space between the Western metaphysical obsession with pure luminosity, and a desire for dwelling on the obscure. Bordering on shadowlessness, more insubstantial still than the umbra of a dense object, they are in fact the genesis of shadows stripped down to their ephemeral essence. As such, they lead the gaze, imagination, and insight toward emancipation from the metaphysical shadow sun.

In the verb form, to shadow means to follow closely, right on the heels of someone or something. There are, then, certain thinkers and artists (the distinction between the two is unnecessary; the accurate term should be thinkers-artists) who deserve to be shadowed in the process of contending, whether explicitly or not, with the shadows and the legacy of metaphysics. Nonetheless, I wish to end these brief reflections on a note some will, no doubt, read as overly 'practical'.

The shadow sun is much older than metaphysics; indeed, it is older than humanity itself. It may equally refer to the solar energy released millions of years ago, giving life to the plants and animals whose remains have by now been converted into oil, coal, and natural gas. Not by accident, the economic arm of metaphysics that is global capitalism owes its origins to and still clings onto these non-renewable, highly polluting and deadly sources of energy. Material and intellectual dynamics grow from the same source. Just as the shadow sun prevents us from experiencing the world around us, so it curtails the development of present and future – rather than past – solar energy, along with the return of our minds, imagination, and the senses to the earth, the atmosphere, and the astronomical sun. Today, more than ever, this return is vital to the preservation, continuation, and thriving of finite existence. That is why we cannot afford to ignore the voices and visions of the thinkers-artists capable of charting the paths back to the actual earth, the sky, and everything in-between. ★