



## The Semiotics of light and shadows: modern visual arts and Weimar cinema

Jaka Lombar

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Museum) details the few survivors from the 1000 machines manufactured, carefully analysing an early description and engravings, and being further informed by 2 machines in the national collection; the most useful description of the kinetoscope's workings and operation yet written. Detailed descriptions of the filmstock, perforating and printing, with emphasis on British techniques, follow. Harvey relates how the Science Museum lost Will Day's example to the Cinémathèque Française, obtaining a kinetoscope and kinetophone from other sources, and how a machine from the Oxford Street venue also went overseas.

Appendices: 'Kinetoscope exhibitions in the UK' lists these for the first time, providing a real picture of the machine's widespread appearance – at trades exhibitions and bazaars, at an Ice Carnival, and a Thimble and Cotton Society's Annual Tea and Sale of Work, often sharing billing with a phonograph. From August 1895, we see a sprinkling of kinetophones; the first noted appearance shared with the electrophone system for receiving live audio performances by telephone. 'Paul/Acres and Acres films to 1895' is an important compilation; 'Outcasts of London' was a play centred on a kinetoscope exhibitor. There's a 'British Dealers in Kinetoscopes' list, and a very engaging account of 'The Kinetoscope Legal Action'. More than 50 illustrations; some fresh ones (uncredited) are from the authors' ephemera collections. Not all illustrations cite original sources. The authors have previously collaborated on a groundbreaking history of the mutoscope in Britain. Now their persistent digging in both paper archives and online resources for kinetoscope material gives new depth and detail to a previously sketchy story, and – given the authors' long familiarity with the world of early film – many revealing insights. Not a book to be read just once, it will be on and off the shelf regularly as an important resource.

Stephen Herbert

*Independent Scholar*

 [s-herbert@easynet.co.uk](mailto:s-herbert@easynet.co.uk)

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**The semiotics of light and shadows: modern visual arts and Weimar cinema**, by Piotr Sadowski, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, xvi + 272 pp., US\$115.20 (hardback), ISBN: 9781350016149

Piotr Sadowski's monograph is a wide-ranging study of the shadow, an optical phenomenon that can be at once ethereal and fleeting, yet can also represent a crucial symbolic and affective force on screen. The cross-disciplinary approach of this study utilises semiotics, art history, film studies and other fields that share a vested interest in the visualisation of shadows across various media and eras in order to chart continuities and ruptures in production and depiction of light and shadow. It culminates in the analysis of a particularly relevant period in film history, namely the Weimar cinema. Accordingly, Sadowski divided the book into six chapters so that the first three engage with the phenomena in a more general manner while the remaining three focus explicitly on examples from early cinema, the Weimar period, and finally on the spatial dimensions of the city symphony genre. The interpreting of the wide spectrum of lighting, specifically through the context of German Expressionist films, recontextualises some of the contemporary issues in film studies. It does so by reminding the reader of the vital role of semiotic analysis in discussing the indexicality of visual media and the interpretation of the intentionality of signs in artworks; such approach widens the engagement of the study far

beyond its historical scope. By methodically engaging in close readings of the cinematic texts, the author brings forth compelling examples of stylistically significant depictions of shadows while at the same time his broader contextual considerations of the films augment the singularity of any given sequence and integrate them into the larger historical, social, political and philosophical milieu of their production.

In his first chapter, Sadowski delineates the complex relationship between natural, even contingent occurrences of shadows, and intentional depictions which transform the phenomenon into a 'meaningful visual sign' (11). Grounding the appeal of engagement with shadows in the evolutionary semiotic theory, he proposes that the power of the iconic and indexical features, located in the shadow theatre, silhouette portraits, films and other similar media, stimulates the primal responses and imagination of the viewers. Chapter 2 explores the treatment of shadows in visual arts in the broadest sense, engaging with artworks that range from the late antiquity to the Baroque. One example of Sadowski's breath of research links the *chiaroscuro* of Caravaggio with the lighting in Paul Leni's 1924 film *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, a stylistic similarity that is then contrasted with Canaletto's neoclassical cityscapes, which were created with the aid of the camera obscura. The following chapter carries on with the ubiquitous presence of shadows in visual arts, but rather than emphasising the similarities between the varieties of media that depict them, it charts the divergence that separates a painting from an indexical photograph. For Sadowski, the latter is in a sense more relatable to a shadow as it 'retains something of the physical, solid reality from which it is somehow released' (58).

Chapter 4 shifts the focus of the inquiry onto the shadows in early cinema, setting up the remainder of the book for exploration of monochrome motion pictures. By the virtue of absence of multiple colours, even when early films are tinted or toned, they manage to portray shadows in a manner that amplifies their presence on screen. Sadowski frames shadows as being capable of forming 'meaningful spatial relationships and tensions' (2018, 101) particularly in the cases of artificial lighting that became available with the advent of electricity. In Chapter 5, shadows are read through their relation to their referent, thus bringing into consideration issues of corporeality. For instance, Sadowski notes that the titular villain of F. W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu* casts a quintessential shadow despite being a vampire, underlining the function of shadows as signifiers of characters' ontological uncertainty. This might seem counterintuitive if we consider shadow to be a result of an embodied resistance to unrestricted light, but to hone in the constructive nature of such physical linkage, the book points out that some expressionist films had the shadows painted onto their sets, thus destabilising a shadow's guarantee of the material status of its referent. Indeed, Sadowski posits that the films of the Weimar era were capable of manipulating not only our perception of the referents of shadows but also the sources of light that created them. The author's example here is F. W. Murnau's 1925 film *Herr Tartüff*, which simulated candlelight by relying on an electric spotlight technique, thereby utilising modern technology in order to evoke a specific affective but also obsolete visual appearance.

The final chapter transposes the issues of embodiment and contingency that surround shadows onto the surfaces of the city, as it is depicted in Murnau's 1924 film *Der letzte Mann* and Walter Ruttmann's 1927 *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, among others. For Sadowski, the former exemplifies the transition between Expressionist cinema and the New Objectivity with its darkly lit social tenements and more bright downtown, the latter shines light on the labour and entertainment of the Berlin's inhabitants in a manner that is much more nuanced and concerned with urban spatiality itself. Here, the light and shadows are read as they interact with the architecture through the movement of the city dwellers and the natural and artificial lighting on which a modern city relies. To conclude, Sadowski brings forth the ending sequence of Georg W. Pabst 1931 film *Die Dreigroschenoper*, in

which the characters retreat into the shadow of ‘uncertainty and menace’ (230), which the author relates to the coming collapse of the Weimar republic.

Overall, *The Semiotics of Light and Shadows* offers an illuminating exploration of the cinema’s ability to evoke a variety of responses from the depictions of interplay between light and shadows, the interplay that is itself a constituent part of the medium. Throughout the chapters the author proceeds to bring a welcome attention and a wealth of references to bear on an understudied aspect of cinematic history and it is for this reason that the broadness of the work feels rightly necessary.

Jaka Lombar

University of Amsterdam

✉ [jaka.lombar@student.uva.nl](mailto:jaka.lombar@student.uva.nl)

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**Mexican costumbrismo: race, society and identity in nineteenth-century art**, by Mey-Yen Moriuchi, Pennsylvania, Penn State University Press, 2018, 180 pp. (hardcover) 99,95 dollar, ISBN 978-0-271-07907-3

This beautifully edited and well-researched book explores a wide variety of visual representations of Mexican common life in popular nineteenth-century illustrated print and fine arts. These art works are produced by both Mexican and foreign artists. The wide scope makes the book worthwhile not only for people interested in Mexican art and society but also for a wider group of scholars interested in identity-studies and early popular visual culture.

*Costumbrismo* is an overarching scholarly term for cultural works from the nineteenth century dealing with the daily lives and work of common people. The term is mainly used with respect to Spain and its (former) colonies. The costumbrismo tradition was expressed in many ways and genres: in periodicals, travel writing, novels, wood engravings and lithographs, paintings, photographs and music. In Mexico, the genre had precursors in eighteenth-century art and in ethnographic sketches by foreign artists. It became most dynamic after Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821.

In this study, Moriuchi convincingly demonstrates not only that the various representations of common life are inspired by earlier works and by one another but also that they established ideas about social and racial types in Mexican society; some of which continue to play a role to this day. These representations generally associate white people with being by birth more important and naturally more powerful over others in Mexican society. Moriuchi, an art historian, argues that the continuity of these ideas strongly relates to the repetitive reproduction of recognizable types and roles in early popular visual culture. Her argument is supported by a wide range of illustrations from popular costumbrismo publications and often relatively unknown Mexican art works; the volume offers 31 illustrations in colour and 29 in black-and-white, reproduced on high-quality paper.

How did this typology work? In five clearly written chapters, Moriuchi follows the methodological lines of comparison and intertextuality and offers interpretations from various angles. Chapter 1 gives background information on how the years following Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 were important to the development of social and racial identities in Mexico. Before this year, the eighteenth-century genre of so called *casta* paintings, in which people from