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About Stain(s)*

Barbara Baert

A STAIN IS THE EVIDENCE of something that was. It's a trace. A stain may be something quite ordinary: the ink stain on my index finger, the mark of your fingers on this page. A stain may also be embarrassing: lipstick on a cheek, sweat rings under the arms, a bloody discharge. A stain may be forensically incriminating (blood). Or a stain may be kept for sentimental reasons. Moreover, every stain has its own particular texture. Texture denotes the consistency of a surface and the sensory, often tactile imprint that is left on it. The stain may be absorbed *in* the thing that supports it; then again, it may stay *on* the surface. In short, every stain is unique (fig. 1).

The second a stain appears it asserts its autonomy as a *spot or patch of colour different from the ground* (OED). The stain makes its mark; it sets itself apart. The stain makes no claim to be anything more than contour, form, matter and dimension. It exists in and of itself. It is guilt-free.¹ The stain tells us what it means to be the medium of visibility. Hence, every stain is a *Metabild* (a particular image that explains something about the image as a phenomenon).²

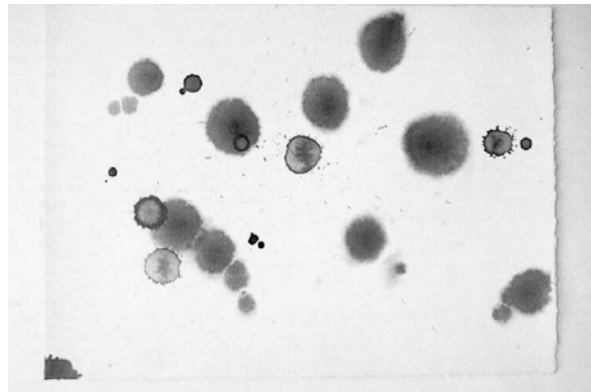


Fig. 1. Antony Gormley, *Sympathetic Field II*, 1991.

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¹ This is a reference to Marie-José Mondzain: *L'image naturelle*, Paris 1995. In that manifesto Mondzain defends the iconophilic image. I return to this issue below. I have also addressed Mondzain's publication in Barbara Baert: *Iconogenesis or Reflections on the Byzantine Theory of Imagery*, in: *A-Prior* 7 (2002), pp. 128–141.

² Jenni Sorkin: *Stain. On Cloth, Stigma and Shame*, in: *Third Text* 53 (2001), pp. 77–80.

These properties make the stain a paradigm for the visual medium per se.³ In this essay I will deal with five factors that could have led to this powerful model: the stain as prototype, Veronica's stain, the psycho-energetic symptom, Echo's camouflage and finally, the stain as *le désir mimétique*.

1. Prototype

One of the stain's most salient characteristics is its relationship with a primal source. The stain does not simply appear out of the ether but originates in an external prototype. The body secretes its fluids onto the fabric; the pores leave their traces on the book; the paintbrush drips onto the canvas.

In many cases a stain appears as a devitalized vestige of its prototype, a dimmed, diminished allusion to its primal source—the greasy stain of fingertips, the wan amber stain of the orange, the sapless crust of once-fluid semen, the palliated purple stain of the noble mulberry. Which is not to say that the stain is devoid of meaning. As soon as the stain lands on its support it regenerates as a mutable substance that has the potential to become image. But that's as far as it goes: it doesn't proceed to a stage of finish and figuration. The stain makes use of the antecedent, the visual-in-potential. The stain is already image in its promise of consummation as an image—it has no need to fulfil that promise.

The stain is arbitrary in both shape and substance. It appears as soon as you see it. It disturbs and confronts. Therefore, the stain has a particular relationship with time and space. A stain is the tangible reminder of something that is past. A stain is a history, a trace, and so it also evokes the *place* where it originated. That relationship between time, memory and place is not peculiar to the stain; it's also a characteristic of the relic.⁴ A relic is a physical remainder of a body or a thing believed to be sanctified from contact with the dead individual. The relic is thus a tangible trace of a venerated body (a saint, a martyr, a biblical figure) and enables a synecdochic continuation of corporeal worship. The relic contains the powers of the deceased, but is only fragmentally related to them. Tangibility, fragment, *eros* and *thanatos* are key vectors of the relic.⁵

³ Georges Didi-Huberman: Anhaltspunkt für eine abwesende Wunde. Monographie eines Flecks, in: Bettine Menke and Barbara Vinken (eds.): *Stigmata. Poetiken der Körperinschrift*, München 2004, pp. 319–340.

⁴ Barbara Baert: The Glorified Body. Relics, Materiality and the Internalized Image, in: Paul Vandenbroeck and Gerrit Rooiackers (eds.): *Backlit Heaven*, Mechelen 2009, pp. 130–153.

⁵ Brigitte Pelzer: Relicten, in: Paul Vandenbroeck (ed.): *Hooglied. De beeldwereld van*

The stain attaches itself to those same vectors within the triangle of time, memory and place. The stain has a complex relationship with the body. Firstly, many stains are made by bodily fluids. Intentionally or unintentionally, in various ways and places, we leave our own traces in the form of *liquid relics*. A stain of this kind is an extension of our own physical boundaries and marks our dealings with the world (whether embarrassing, scabrous or sexualized). The stain *articulates* the pact between the body and the world. In that sense, the stain is an important expression of man and his phenomenological involvement. The stain is literally a *support* for excretion, for the joys and sorrows (not infrequently accompanied by odours) that man spreads around and that establish him in his corporeal existence and question it over and over again. In his *Natural History* (c. 77 CE), Pliny the Elder relates how one day the beautiful Venus carved by Praxiteles (c. late fifth or early sixth century BCE) in the circular temple at Knidos was seen to bear the tell-tale stain of lustful passion on her spotless white marble, left there by an overly ardent admirer.⁶

Secondly, the bodily stain is often deposited on a textile. Textiles are inherently able to catch and collect, producing a growth-friendly environment. Thus textiles actually thematize the preface to creation—are the precondition for it, amorphous, not yet formed. That is all the formless yet *potent* stain does. Stains and textiles are very closely related. Textiles are stains' preferred support. Textiles collect stains and stains, if they are to be seen, need textiles.

Clothing is the practical expression of identity, and according to magical interpretations it intensifies the soul and the inner powers of the wearer. The stain encapsulates that special relationship; it forms the *punctum* in the private space between the body and its wrappings, between the skin and the textile that forms its extension. The stain is a *condensation* of ourselves; it is our synecdoche.

Thirdly and lastly, in its most radical form the stain is itself part of the body: yesterday's bruise, a child's freckles, a woman's beauty spot—not excluding the malignant melanoma. However, to remain *stain* in this radical *skin shape* it should remain intrinsically *closed*. For once the stain goes beyond the boundary of the *skin*, once the fabric bursts *open*, stain becomes *wound* and loses its essential characteristic of being *surface*, *texture*.

religieuze vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden vanaf de 13de eeuw, Brussels 1994, pp. 179–204.

⁶ Pliny: *Naturalis Historia*, vol. 4, book 20, n.p. n.d.; Zita Ágota Pataki: Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Bild und Text am Beispiel von Lucas Cranachs ruhender Quellnymphe, in: Wolfgang Weber (ed.): *Wissenswelten. Perspektiven der neuzeitlichen Informationskultur*, Augsburg 2003, pp. 115–133; 126.

2. Veronica's stain. Blood

Yves Klein writes: »Un jour le Ciel Bleu est tombé sur la terre / et de sa Blessure le sang a jailli / c'était du Rouge éclatant brillant et pétillant (27 February 1951).« (fig. 2).⁷ Every work of art, every *iconization* of a thought, every emotion that needs a visual expression, is made possible by the mystery of an invisibility (metaphorically expressed in the blue sky) that has reduced itself



Fig. 2. Yves Klein (1928–1962), *Un jour le Ciel Bleu est tombé sur la terre / et de sa Blessure le sang a jailli / c'était du Rouge éclatant brillant et pétillant* (27 February 1951).

to flesh (metaphorically expressed in gushing red) whose only desire is to be *plastic*. In fact it is hard to conceive of any mystery greater than that process, and it has given our art history a discourse on descent into matter, on describability, on skin and on body fluids—in short, on stains. Put yet another way, in the mystery of the stain the insupportable image of the iconoclast—for whom the image is taboo and lethal—is made supportable by the mediation of the body as a septum of the image. The iconoclast has no corpus to absorb the shock of the image. In iconophilia, namely the love of the image and the freedom of creation within the binomial of *plattomenos* (modelling) and the world of *mimesis* (representing), the body is understood as support, protector and legitimation of the artistic.⁸ Which brings me to the stain of Veronica.

Iconophilic mediation (the body as a septum of the image) is expressed not only paradigmatically but also *literally* in the character of Veronica, a woman who received the image of Christ with its miraculous imprint of blood and sweat stains as the support, protector and legitimation of the artistic (fig. 3). Emanating from an invisible God (the prototype), form and matter descend into the world of the visible (an imprint). The Incarnation is the dynamic between descent and imprint, and the stain condenses that dynamic, as it were. In short, the stain becomes the paradigm of a transference in the tangible world by means of the prototype (material or immaterial) of a matrix (artistic or divine).

⁷ Horst Bredekamp: *Theorie des Bildakts*, Berlin 2010, p. 258.

⁸ Barbara Baert: *The Gendered Visage. Facets of the Vera Icon*, in: *Annual of the Antwerp Royal Museum*, Antwerp 2000, pp. 10–43.

Veronica is the female body that generates the image on the white sheet of her own garment. She is the female body that devises and revises the complex boundaries of the stain from the point of view of its generative potential.⁹ As a theme, Veronica connects all the aspects that use iconophilic energy: relic, textile, imprint. On top of that, the theme of Veronica is the inexhaustible source of this energy. The *vera icon* has the immense task of absorbing the shock of the image—the face that draws the image to itself and from there creatively pushes it outwards again. »And in the midst a round small hole must have, / That Species may pass, and repasse through, / Life the Prospective every thing to view« (Margaret Cavendish, 1623–1673).

There are visionary descriptions by female mystics from which an extraordinarily plastic interpretation of the *vera icon* emerges. In one of her *showings*, Julian of Norwich (c.1342–c.1416) describes the black appearance of the *vera icon*:¹⁰ »The revelation symbolized and resembled our foul, black mortality, in which our fair, bright, blessed Lord concealed his divinity.«¹¹ At a basic level this explains the Incarnation. The black is the image of confined corporeality, God's humiliation in a human body. Julian applies the *black face* to our own ontology. At a second level, the black stain recalls a potentiality, an image in the making, in transformation from the dark black zone that precedes figuration.

At another time Julian sees first one half of the black face and then the other, suddenly caked with dried blood. In the first instance one might think of the conventional image of the suffering Christ: the *double red* in the black could be an allusion to the irrefutability of the two natures. The black *foulness* is representable

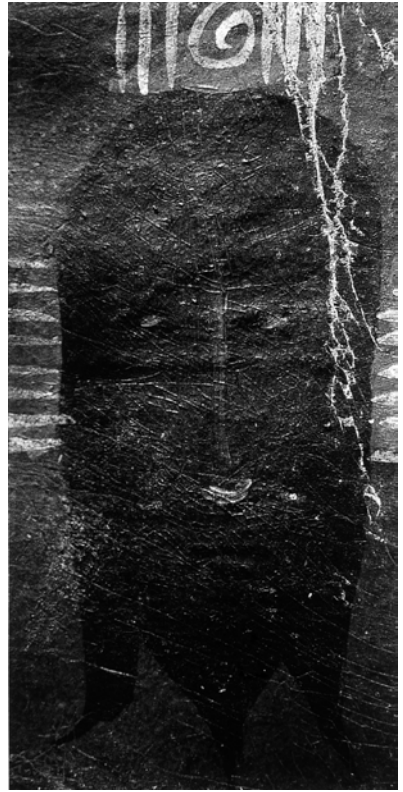


Fig. 3. Late-medieval Veronica on leather, from the Cistercian convent of Wienhausen (Lower Saxony).

⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum: Die Frau als Körper und Nahrung, in: Bettine Menke and Barbara Vinken (eds.): *Stigmata. Poetiken der Körperinschrift*, München 2004, pp. 114–144.

¹⁰ Jeffrey F. Hamburger: *The Visual and the Visionary. Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, Michigan 1998, p. 366.

¹¹ Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (eds.): *Julian of Norwich. Showings*, New York 1978, pp. 194–195.

in the red blood.¹² The red gives shape to the black chaos, and thus makes visible the divine concealment of which Julian spoke: redemption through sacrifice.¹³

Is it a coincidence that Veronica has been identified with the ailing haemorrhaging and therefore *stained* woman who was healed by Christ (Mk 5, 24–34)?¹⁴ Is it a coincidence that Veronica was also the patron saint of laundresses—those removers of stains?¹⁵ In its eager embrace of the earlier paradigms—from prefiguration, blood, liquefying and solidifying, to relic, imprint and textile—Veronica's stain becomes doubly profound and radicalized: now the stain claims the uncontaminated and compunctious field of the female (the woman bleeds, the woman stains, the woman washes the stain away, the woman bears and gives birth), and shows its psycho-energetic character.

3. The psycho-energetic symptom

	stāi-, stī-, stī-ā-
English meaning:	to condense, press together
German meaning:	verdichten, zusammendrängen, stopfen; sich verdichten, gerinnen, stocken
General comments:	dazu <u>stēib(h)-</u> , <u>stēip-</u> : Stange usw.
Derivatives:	<u>stī-īā-</u> : etwas Dichtes, <u>stī-mo-</u> , <u>stī-ro-</u> : dicht ¹⁶

Strikingly, in Indo-European languages the words for *stain* denote the body *in* the world, but also, at a more abstract level, they designate the dynamic between *flux*

¹² Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) calls ›colour‹ a precondition of *Darstellbarkeit*; Georges Didi-Huberman: Un sang d'images, in: Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse 32 (1985), pp. 123–153: 136.

¹³ »Le sang christique démontre les vertus structurales au point même où l'informe coulée (le jet d'humeur) se relève en fantasme originaire (la plaie christique)«; Didi-Huberman: Un sang d'images (as note 12), p. 136; see also Didi-Huberman's article in: Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse 35 (1987), pp. 9–49.

¹⁴ Barbara Baert, Liesbet Kusters and Emma Sidgwick: An issue of blood. The healing of the woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 5.24B–34, Luke 8.42B–48, Matthew 9.19–22) in early medieval visual culture, in: Manfred Horstmannshoff (ed.): Blood, Sweat and Tears. The Changing Concepts of Physiology from Antiquity into Early Modern Europe, Leiden 2012, pp. 307–338.

¹⁵ Until well into the seventeenth century in Rouen it was customary for brides to make offerings of phallic symbols in the local St. Veronica chapel; Paul Sartori: Veronika, in: Hans Bächtold-Stäubli (ed.): Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, vol. 8, Berlin/Leipzig 1937, cols. 1614–1615.

¹⁶ Julius Pokorny: Indo-European Etymological Dictionary, under: <http://indo-european.info/pokorny-etymological-dictionary/index.htm>: stāi-, stī-, stī-ā- (10 February 2016).

and *counter-flux*. For example: sebaceous secretion, congelation and drying, compact, condense and contract, concentration, rigidity, numb, inert, sluggish, immobile, standing water and silence, wall, anxiety, nosophobia.

By descending into the depths of our own words we dive into the undercurrent of our consciousness and reach the as yet unarticulated breeding ground of our own ideas and dealings with the world, the *khōra*.¹⁷ Anthropologists and psychoanalysts examine this seedbed and teach us the way we must follow to get to it. The stain also draws its energy from a sub-terrain situated in the *khōra*. From that *subversive* position the stain associates itself with affect-laden patterns and intuition, with the psycho-energetics of morphological language as opposed to the classical canon and stylistic convention. This is why the properties of stains are often indescribable. Stains escape, they are transient, but they decidedly have a presence that is literally expressed in an aura, an edge. »What is hardest to get rid of with [blood]stains is the rim, the circle, the circumference, I don't know why that should stick to the floor more obstinately than the rest [...] even when the blood is fresh, as soon as it's spilled, there's doubtless some physical law that explains it, although I don't know what it is.«¹⁸ (Javier Marías)

Stains exist in and because of marginality. They are powerful underworlds. They are fretful and refractory. »Here I am«, says the stain. »No one's to blame; I had to come. My meaning is that which expands to the shore. I am the epistemology of that which accumulates at the brink, of that which continues to shine when a star goes out. I am the energy called *residue* that clings to the edge of your memory. I am what thickens and marks out. I am deposit. I am crust. I am the margin where you leak away. I am what you want to rub out.«

The stain possesses three keys to the *khōra*: body and textile (as shown above), performative expression and ritual action, and finally aesthetics as formal subconscious.¹⁹ The first key is connected with doubling: body and textile are parallels. One speaks of the *moi-peau*, the *I-skin*. The *I-skin* is a buffer, a two-dimensional membrane. We recognize it in lace, darning, woven fabrics. Here, in the medium of textile, the stain finds its preferred membrane.

The second key relates to the *shifted* body: the energy of the body moves elsewhere, to a place where it can flourish undisturbed, like the dance, but also in a new plastic refuge, like the stain. The shifted body does not express itself alle-

¹⁷ According to Plato's (427–347 BCE) *Timaeus*, *Chora* (*Khōra*) is a place, an interval; Jacques Derrida: *Khōra*, in: Thomas Dutoit (ed.): *On the Name*, Stanford/Paris 1995, pp. 87–127.

¹⁸ Javier Marías: *Your Face Tomorrow* 1. Fever and Spear, London 2006, translated by Margaret Jull Costa, p. 139 (first published in Spain as *Tu rostro mañana* 1. *Fiebre y lanza*, Barcelona/Madrid 2002).

¹⁹ Paul Vandenbroeck: *The Energetics of an Unknowable Body*, in: Paul Vandenbroeck and Gerrit Rooiackers (eds.): *Backlit Heaven*, Mechelen 2009, pp. 174–204: 178.

gorically but *allo-deictically*, which is to say in a *different-showing* way, and is therefore unconventional in its signifiers and symbols.

With the third key the expression of the energetic body shifts to areas where the connection with the body is no longer literally articulated or has faded considerably.²⁰ These areas involve non-figurative forms of expression. That last borderland is psychosomatic, intuitive; ultimately it's even therapeutic. The creative process coming from the borderland with the psycho-corporeal, the psychosomatic and the kinetic, restores a pre-aesthetic and pre-conscious manifestation of the body-in-the-world. It takes place in a humus: »The deeper one plunges into the seething cauldron of processing the psycho-corporeal experience of existence and its paradoxes, the further one departs from its aesthetic elaboration and the closer one gets to its source.«²¹ (Paul Vandenbroeck)

As a means of access to the *khōra* all three keys share a common characteristic: the creation of forms of expression that *bypass* language. A sub-symbolic transfer is at work (related to the prefiguration and pre-vocality touched on above).²² Meaning is conveyed as an emotion, an affect-laden quantum that nonetheless leaves a stylistic and aesthetic imprint. So there is indeed a transference of content, but it is based rather on an *energetic experience*, a *representation*, an *active participation in the gaze* in the borderland between psyche and body—hence the term psychoneuroenergetics.

As will have appeared by now, the stain is unique in possessing all three types of access to the *khōra*, for it is strongly linked to textile as its intimate support, to the performative expression of a dynamic prototype and to a wilful urge towards form, namely to be image-in-potential, to evade the realms of denominatable figuration. In short, the stain attaches itself to the membrane, to the textile that shields and protects. And thus it undulates with the fluctuations of a performative essence: veiling and unveiling, flaring up and dying down, soiling and washing away. The stain is a metaphor for both the cradle and the grave, for the early emergence of a shadow and the etiolation of a trace. It is surging forms that manifest themselves, but may also vanish in a trice, emblemizing the creative urge and the death urge.

Recently the Belgian psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe introduced a pendant to the *khōra*. Verhaeghe prefers to speak of *chthonic art* (derived from the Greek and relating to or inhabiting the underworld), a concept he developed as a corollary to his study on the life and work of Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) (fig. 4).²³ He writes:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 179.

²¹ Ibid., p. 186.

²² Ibid.

²³ Paul Verhaeghe: Louise Bourgeois. Chthonische kunst of de weg naar het Reële en Terug,

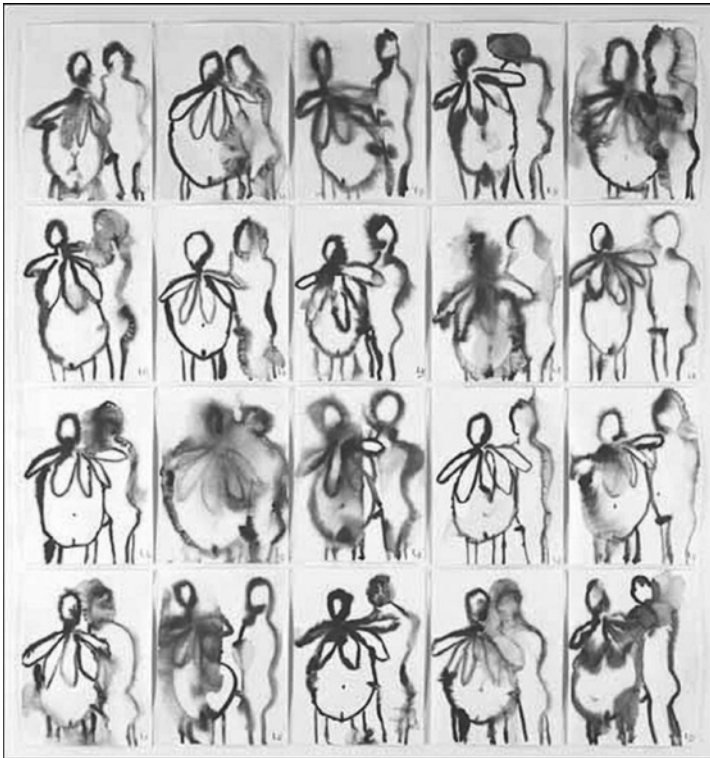


Fig. 4. Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), *Couples*, 2007, Gouache.

»A reworking of the irrepresentable makes it bearable, prepares a bestowal of meaning, which makes it bearable. [...] She [Bourgeois] tries to give shape to the inexpressible. [...] Chthonic art is different from and contrasts with Oedipal art, which in one way or another is always a sexual genital and relational processing of these originally undifferentiated and terrifying forces. [...] The Oedipal development is the final stage in this reworking process because it channels and socializes the life and death urges. [...] Freud calls the grieving process *Trauerarbeit* and equates it with analytical *Arbeit*, the work that someone undergoing psychoanalysis does. In both cases the person's identity is deconstructed by destroying the layers of identification that constitute the ego, whether through the grieving process that removes the deceased from the identity of the mourner, or by analysis, whereby free association pulverizes identity as such.«²⁴

in: Mark Kinet, Marc De Kesel and Sjef Houppermans (eds.): *For your pleasure? Psychoanalyse over esthetisch genot*, Antwerp 2013, pp. 69–90: 78.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

So, in chthonic art one undergoes a deconstruction and then a reconstruction, aided by the creative process.

As a result of the paradigm of the psycho-energetic symptom, a hitherto hard-to-reach site of the stain is approached: the creative process itself or the irrepresentable zone between image and primal source. I see this intermediate space as highly kinetic, equipped with an energy comparable to the ever-expanding circles on the surface of water when a stone has been thrown in. This brings me to the next chapter: camouflage.

4. Echo's Camouflage

Camouflage is both a visual paradigm as a *Gefühlsraum* and an interesting alternative within the scopic regime.²⁵ This alternative knowing/feeling of a forgotten and suppressed chthonic world will be linked to Echo's final fate: her physically disappearing. The dissolution-death of the nymph, her becoming one with the world surrounding her, forms a scopic regime about stains that has been underexposed (*the silenced hole*) because the paradigm is sidelined by the phallogocentric so-called *sharpness-sight*. It demands a way of looking that vaporizes, that confuses, that forgoes edges, but instead aims for a smudged unification or dismantling between the *self* and the world (*stainy* metamorphosis that is *fluid*, foamy, ungraspable rather than stable). Moreover, it makes the self dissolve into the *outside world*, thus sacrificing the subject to a constantly misleading and boundless blending in with the world around it.²⁶

From a psycho-pathological point of view, camouflage is closely related to psychasthenia or neurasthenia: a spatial confusion affecting the distinction between an individual and the surrounding environment that results as a type of dissolution, or loss of self (fig. 5). It concerns an instinct of abandon or the desire for ego dissolution and inertia.²⁷ Echo, the nymph of camouflage and visual fusion with nature, thematises becoming nothing and the silencing of the self, and thus radicalizes stains as a visual paradigm of loss and sacrifice.

²⁵ With this *feelings space*, Hermann Schmitz means the philosophical locus of emotions, as they stretch between the subject and the world; Hermann Schmitz: *Der Raum. Der Gefühlsraum*, in: Hermann Schmitz: *System der Philosophie*, vol. 3, Bonn 1981, pp. 264–276. See also Barbara Baert: *Locus Amoenus and the Sleeping Nymph. Ekphrasis, Silence and Genius Loci*, in: *Studies in Iconology* 3 (2016).

²⁶ Kajsa G. Eriksson: *Sea Harbour People. Mimesis, Camouflage, Masquerade*, in: *The Politics of Magma, Art Monitor. A Journal of Artistic Research* 5 (2008), pp. 17–25.

²⁷ Roger Caillois: *Mimétisme et Psychasthénie légendaire*, in: *Minotaure* 2/7 (1935), pp. 9–10.



Fig. 5. Owl in state of camouflage.

Roger Caillois (1913–1978), sociologist, philosopher, and literary critic, developed a new type of hermeneutics that he calls the *sciences diagonales*.²⁸ Caillois defines the *sciences diagonales* as the hermeneutic exchange between humans and animals. The diagonal references between knowledge about nature and knowledge about human civilization reveal an epistemology of correspondence and correlation. After all, humans compare themselves to fauna and flora, and recognize themselves in it through paralleling processes.²⁹ With this analogy, the *sciences diagonales* trace subconscious and often instinctive thoughts.

According to Caillois, there are three types of correlation and *mimétismes* in the *sciences diagonales*: travesty, camouflage and intimidation.³⁰

Travesty belongs to the mythography of metamorphosis and disguise. Its medium is textile. Travesty is often a feminine matter, employing the phantasm of likeness (*resemblance*). Travesty is essentially endogenous (from the self). Camouflage is part of the mythography of invisibility, secrets, of being motionless (*immobilité*) and feeling-less. Its medium is nature. It is an action that is both feminine and masculine, employing the phantasm of disappearance.

²⁸ Roger Caillois: *Méduse et Cie*, in: Roger Caillois : *Oeuvres*, Paris 2008, pp. 479–558: 479.

²⁹ See also: Richard Riegler: *Das Tier im Spiegel der Sprache. Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Bedeutungslehre*, Dresden 1907.

³⁰ Caillois: *Méduse et Cie* (as note 28), pp. 521–526.

Camouflage is essentially allocryptic (imitating other objects for concealment by a covering of extraneous things). In short, camouflage answers to a simultaneity of two beings/essences in one body with protection as intrinsic finality.³¹

Intimidation belongs to the mythography of the *evil eye* and the spectrum of the *gorgoneia* (Medusa). Its medium is the body and the boundaries of the skin, such as tattoos and masks. Intimidation is often seen as masculine and employs the *panic* spectrum. Intimidation is essentially phobic.

In his text *Camouflage and Mimesis*, Bernd Hüppauf formulates interesting reflections about the paradigmatic importance of camouflage.³² Like mimesis, camouflage enmeshes one reality onto another: the chameleon that changes its skin to take on the texture of a branch, or the grapes that Zeuxis (after about 425 BC in Athens) painted look just as if they are real, seemingly dismantling the boundary between the painted reality and reality.³³ But there is a difference. Camouflage *transcends* mimesis. Camouflage goes beyond the mimicking quality of deception and falsification. Camouflage is an affect, perhaps even an anti-mimesis. Camouflage is aimed at the dynamic transformation and transition of boundaries, while mimesis remains focused on the sharp duality between the other and the self. Camouflage, in other words, is an unarticulated fault line between the outside world and the self, while mimesis recognizes the insurmountable paradigm between the other and the self. In short, camouflage has the visual finality of fading: it possesses the alienating obscurity that counters the category of limitations between various parts. When you extrapolate that to a visual anthropology, camouflage is part of the world of stains: disorder, trance and ecstasy (the product of the *marginal spirit*) while mimesis belongs to the world of figurative art: order and trust (a product of *ocularcentrism*). Camouflage is aimed at deception, mimesis at perception.

In his book *Camouflage*, Neil Leach proves that the dissolving syndrome (or visual inertia) can expand our horizon of visual understanding.³⁴ According to Leach, camouflage has affinities with thirteen paradigms that in one way or another are also explicated in the myth of Echo and Narcissus: Mimesis, Sensuous Correspondence, Sympathetic Magic, Mimicry, Becoming, Death, Narcissism, Identity, Paranoia, Belonging, Sacrifice, Melancholy and Ecstasy. Camouflage is a life principle and a sacrifice strategy that closely interweaves life and death. The action that seems nihilist pays off in the self-sacrifice to the world. From a visual

³¹ Ibid., pp. 512–515.

³² Bernd Hüppauf: Camouflage and Mimesis. The Frog between the Devil's Deceptions. Evolutionary Biology, and the Ecological Animal, in: Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie 23/1 (2014), pp. 132–155.

³³ Donald Kunze: The Art 3 Idea. A Third Way to Study Art, 2000, passim.

³⁴ Neal Leach: Camouflage, London/Cambridge, MA 2006.

standpoint, camouflage is firstly a manifestation, but secondly *latent* enough to remain exchangeable.

There is a certain *pre-figurability* in the carriers and materials that mimesis has not yet *attained*. Marble, for example, vacillates between abstraction and figuration, between liquid and solid. The image is *being shaped in the cocoon*.³⁵ Camouflage teaches us about another and completely new relation between medium, self-identification (Echo's *self* as loss, or at least as repetition of the other voice), and a visual (re)presentation as *blending into the world*. The world becomes the carrier of the image as loss and an empty space, and the medium becomes an act of *dissolving*, of vaporizing. (That is why the diaphanous – even in the animal world: for example deep-sea jellyfish – is perhaps the most pure form of camouflage).

For Echo, camouflage is self-liberating, but at the same time, a stifling entanglement with the self. From the visual-paradigmatic point of view, camouflage is comparable with the principle of *horror vacui*. In this context, Tim Ingold uses the term *dissolution of surface*. *Horror vacui* allows the surface to disappear: we see not so much the knot as whatever it is that the knot seals, conceals, covers, opens and shuts. The mesh, the labyrinth and the knot all arise at the threshold: there where the maelstrom and the magical abyss beckon, there where *horror vacui* is motivated in order to take unaware *and* to shelter.³⁶ It is there, in the dissolution of surface that Echo flees, finds peace, finds nest, finds death.³⁷ This brings me to the final chapter: *le désir mimétique*.

5. By way of conclusion. *Le désir mimétique*

In *The Signature of all Things: On Method* Giorgio Agamben defines the concept of the paradigm as follows: »In the paradigm, intelligibility does not precede the phenomenon; it stands, so to speak *beside* it (*para*). According to Aristotle's definition, the paradigmatic gesture moves not from the particular to the whole and from the whole to the particular but from the singular to the singular.«³⁸ As a paradigm of the image, the stain also runs *parallel* with the image. The stain does not replace the image: the stain moves towards the image and vice versa. The one

³⁵ See also: John Onians: Abstraction and Imagination in Late Antiquity, in: *Art History* 3 (1980), pp. 1–24; 8; Paul Vandenbroeck: Matrix Marmorea. De subsymbolische iconografie van de scheppende energieën in Europa en Noord-Afrika, in: Lut Pil and Trees De Mits (eds.): *Materie & Beeld*, Ghent 2010, pp. 51–78.

³⁶ Tim Ingold: *Lines. A Brief History*, London/New York 2007, p. 53.

³⁷ Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas, New York 2014, p. 114.

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben: *The Signature of All Things. On Method*, New York 2009, pp. 26–32: 27.

(the stain) does not overpower the other (the image), nor does the other (the image) underestimate the one (the stain). The equivalency between stain and image ensures a perfectly pure desire between stain and image. The relationship between them is to use a *contradictio-in-terminis*: *immaculata*; their desire is one continuous *désir mimétique* in the sense developed by René Girard in his study of the literature of Greek mythology and biblical stories.³⁹ »Bien sûr, tous les types de sexualité peuvent surgir dans un contexte de rivalité mimétique, comme toutes les problématiques sociales d'ailleurs, mais ce qui nous intéresse ce sont les configurations mimétiques qui restent les mêmes, mis à part leur contenu spécifique.«⁴⁰

In *L'image ouverte* Georges Didi-Huberman develops a theory that can be seen as a variant of the *désir mimétique*.⁴¹ He describes the image as a dynamic emotion that opens to the viewer like a door, thus like an *image ouverte*. To Didi-Huberman this *opening* of the image is set in motion in the Christian paradigm of man's creation in the image of God. But in his case man lost that likeness, that *ressemblance*. Image became *défiguration* or *dissemblance*. Conjoined with the history of the image—*la pensée figurée*—is an eternal quest for the restoration of that analogy. Thus, art and iconography are characterized as an infinite series of traces of a lost union. The restoration of that analogy comes closest to its culmination when the Old Covenant cants over into the New Covenant: it's the Incarnation, or *la promesse de retrouver l'image*. But incarnation is irrepresentable: *l'image échappe*. It's a *circumcision de l'image* that repeatedly escapes its matrix. In short, the history of images is a history of ceaseless yearning to coincide with the prototype.

Thinking of *le désir mimétique* and *l'image ouverte* prompts a second digression, this time to consider the Narcissus myth. In the myth (and the pathological *-ism* that was later derived from it), we also find the desire for oneness: the coincidence of the self (I) with its own object of desire (subject, I).⁴² Unlike Narcissus, however,

³⁹ Almut-Barbara Renger: »Imite-moi et ne m'imité pas«. Das »mimetische Begehren« als Ursprung des krisenhaften Verlaufs der Meister-Schüler-Beziehung nach René Girard, in: Christoph Wulf (ed.): Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie 23/2 (2014), pp. 48–62: 55. I cannot devote much space to Girard's patriarchal bias in his mimesis model. The mirror paradigm is *innately* phallogocentric. The author pays no attention to the matriarchal aspects in mythology and religion. For an often critical reading of René Girard, see: Claudia von Werlhof: Satanologie angesichts der Apokalypse. Wovon René Girard (nicht) spricht und was daraus folgt, in: Wolfgang Palaver, Andreas Exenberger and Kristina Stöckl (eds.): Aufgeklärte Apokalypik. Religion, Gewalt und Frieden im Zeitalter der Globalisierung, Innsbruck 2007, pp. 355–390.

⁴⁰ René Girard: Géométries du désir, Paris 2011, pp. 46–47.

⁴¹ Georges Didi-Huberman: Ce que nous voyons ce qui nous regarde, Paris 1992; Georges Didi-Huberman: L'image ouverte, Paris 2007, *passim*.

⁴² Linda Hutcheon: Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox, Waterloo, Canada 1980, pp. 1–16.

the desire described in Girard's *désir mimétique* is not necessarily bad or destructive. The narcissistic personality, on the other hand, emits a depleting energy, an energy that simultaneously discharges and destroys, resorting to an interminable paradoxicality. In the instrumental and perverse adhesion of the other by way of interiorization in order to become *I* (the ultimate desire for an impossible consubstantiality), the necessary and therefore healthy intermediate space of the creative process between the *I* and the other (between the image and its primal source) is destroyed and replaced by a *black hole*.

Nobody can live in the black hole. There is no voice (Echo dies). Everything is liquescent. Total fossilization and emotional sclerosis prevail. There is only the silence of the unquenchable thirst to be filled from the primal source.

Le désir mimétique and *l'image ouverte* require the stain to tread the most difficult path: the detour past the silent, sucking, imploding power of the Narcissus spring. *Le désir mimétique* and *l'image ouverte* demand of the stain a rending but necessary choice: to both attach and detach. The image must constantly move kinetically to and fro, despite the desire to become one. After all, union leads to death (or annihilation), just as the narcissistic *eros* causes the slow suffocation of the ›other‹ in the black all-consuming primal source.

»I am just a shadow, a vestige, or not even that. An aphasic murmur, a dissipated smell and a vanished fever, a scratch without a scab ...«⁴³

To the idea that the image (and, by analogy, the stain) is a trace of the impossible desire to be mimetic (or restored to its authentic indivisible primal form) Girard adds the theme of *skandalon*, to which a pendant can be recognized in Didi-Huberman's *liquefactio*.

The Greek word *skandalizein* is derived from *limp*, *stumble*. *Skandalon* translates to *stumbling block*.⁴⁴ Girard makes an idiosyncratic reflection. If you follow someone with a limp, he writes, you'll see that it seems as if that person repeatedly appears to want to (or is going to) coincide with his shadow without ever succeeding. Girard's image strikingly evokes how limping—the *scandal*—comes closest to the grotesque drama of the image, namely to be unable (or not allowed) to coincide with the *self*. The *scandal* shows in all its deficiency, in all its imperfection and *tristesse*, the loss of the absolute reflection and the impossibility of eliminating the dichotomy:

»Chez tous les écrivains majeurs, je pense, la rhétorique des oxymores constitue une allusion significative aux vicissitudes de l'interaction mimétique et rejoue obscurément

⁴³ Marías: *Your Face Tomorrow* (as note 18), p. 201.

⁴⁴ René Girard: *Scandal and the dance. Salome in the Gospel of Mark*, in: *New Literary History* 15/2 (1984), pp. 311–324.

l'essentiel drame humain de la pierre d'achoppement mimétique, le skandalon des Évangiles que nulle interprétation linguistique ne pourra jamais appréhender.»⁴⁵

The meaning of *stumbling block* is highly ambivalent: it is the defect but also the opening to insight, the obstacle but also the possibility. As if, in the stumbling, everything is briefly lit up. The hope. *The void of the almost*.⁴⁶ The almost-fall before the most extreme fall: the tumble on the verge of *l'image ouverte*. The almost-disappearing into the big black hole. The almost emptying of oneself into the other (Didi-Huberman's *liquefactio* in stigmata: *La tentative d'excéder l'image par l'image*). The stumbling block says: »It's going to happen!« Coincidence with the matrix, the ultimate desire consummated, the emptying of the Neoplatonic binomial in the unity of *nothingness*. But it happens in the emptiness of *almost*.

It limps.

The stain is the *skandalon*: an obstacle but also a hope. In the stain the image limps and reveals its »scandal« and drama. The stain clenches the image like a condensation of insight. The stain as stumbling block is related to the ideas of *disturbance*, *interruption*, *pause* and *interval*. The disturbance of the water's surface. The dangerous Narcissus pool that was stirred. The stitch that's dropped. The thread that comes loose. The stain goes against the weft. The stain as stumbling block is the momentary *hitch* that tells us something about the greater whole. In that sense, the *hitch* reminds us of what the Greeks took for the psychosomatic signal of the soul in the body—the elixir of life (*nepesh*).⁴⁷ *Nepesh* manifests itself physically in shivering, sneezing, nodding, blushing, stuttering, or the sudden nosebleed.⁴⁸ These *spasms* are the momentary flashes that reveal the great unreachable driving force in us—life itself.

The stain is the shiver of the image's soul. It shows the image where it itches. It shows the rim that sticks; it shows the form that thwarts. Thus the stain as *skandalon* keeps us alert. In the stumble, we are alerted to the critical moment, the crack

⁴⁵ Girard: *Géometries du désir* (as note 40), pp. 46–47.

⁴⁶ David Grossman: *Be My Knife*, translated by Vered Almog and Maya Gurantz, New York 2001, p. 195.

⁴⁷ Richard Buxton Onians: *The Origin of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*, Cambridge/London 1951, pp. 480–505. *Nepesh* – the life principle – is the substance that allows a person to live. *Nepesh* uses the medium of blood (which is why the consumption of blood is taboo), but is also associated with breathing in and out, like *ruach*. *Nepesh* resides in the heart, along with the blood. The very earliest texts, such as Assyrian writings, place *nepesh* in the throat. *Nepesh* survives a person's death and remains underground in the deceased. The *nepesh* (blood) of the dead »weeps«. In the translations, *nepesh* comes closest to the Greek *thumos* and the Latin *animus*, according to Onians.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 103–104, p. 197.

in time. In the stumble the image lights up and reveals its hidden intermediate space: the ever-kinetic process of creation (and thus the necessary detour).

»Perhaps, I thought, perhaps it's a way of clinging on to the present, a reluctance to disappear that exists in objects and in the inanimate generally, and not just in people, perhaps it's an attempt by all things to leave their mark, to make it harder for them to be denied or glossed over or forgotten, their way of saying *I was here*, or *I'm still here*, *therefore I must have been before*, and to prevent others from saying *No, this was never here*, *never, it neither strode the world nor trod the earth, it did not exist and never happened.*«⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Mariás: *Your Face Tomorrow* (as note 18), p. 139.