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## Longing for the Light. Darkness, Dislocation and Spaces of Exile

There have been many studies of light and this paper acknowledges all of the scholarship that goes before. However, this is not a study of light but a study of how light defines perceived identity and how our relationship to it in turn defines our own sense of self. I shall be examining work from different areas of the arts, literature, photography and film to develop my argument, showing how writers and artists have located both the subject and the reader/viewer to exploit this dynamic.

Light, as Foucault reminds us, became the most visible symbol of those who, during the Enlightenment, sought to banish darkened spaces and create a visible society. This eventually led to Bentham's design for the Panopticon which became a model of "power through transparency", [and] subjection through 'illumination'.<sup>1</sup> As Foucault points out, it could serve as a template for other areas of society where visibility was a necessary adjunct to other forms of more physical control (the police or the army). Light itself defines space, sets its visible limits, reveals, creates and, as I shall show, establishes identities. Where one positions oneself in relation to the light, depends on a number of factors and determines the limits of inclusion into what we may term 'civilised society'. This paper sets out to look at instances where both spatial and individual identity is established through the position in which the subject is placed in relation to the light and its source.

Ever since the Enlightenment, western culture has had a strange relationship to the dark, alternating between ignorance, fear and suspicion that all things not visible could potentially do us harm or a belief that darkness was the only precondition of the sublime. What followed was an institutional struggle to control light and the nocturnal visibility it afforded, and a private, perhaps more spiritual

desire for darkness. Habermas refers to the control exerted upon communal areas as the "public sphere of authority",<sup>2</sup> and in the seventeenth century this 'authority' became increasingly interested in the activities of dissident groups. Attempts were made to flood darkened spaces with light in an effort to control and police nocturnal space, thus mapping the territory of authority and identifying those in that territory as subject to that control. This, though, did not extend to domestic space, which was largely autonomous until the control of power such as gas, and later, electricity became centralised.

The hegemonic use of light in the street, advocated by Robespierre to banish darkened spaces and produce a visible, transparent and regulated society, attracted some resistance at its inception in Paris during the French Revolution. This resulted in lantern smashing, thereby "symbolically unseating the authority they [the lights] represented: the darkness that prevailed after the lanterns had gone out stood for disorder and freedom".<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting too that the brackets on which the lanterns hung were also used as makeshift gallows: "[B]y day, 1,500 uniformed police were on the streets. By night, 3,500 Lanterns (*réverbères*)<sup>4</sup> achieved the same result."<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 1: Hall, Mark (2006) *Untitled #2***

Bachelard refers to the power and solitude of the single light. It becomes a haven existing subconsciously at the centre of the house, with its power emanating from our desire to be at this centre. As the light travels outward it becomes the axis of vigilance, "a symbol of prolonged waiting".<sup>6</sup> "And the narrower the ray of light, the more penetrating its vigilance".<sup>7</sup> In its vigilance it becomes the watcher, sequestering those who see its light; "its light becomes for me, before me, a house that is looking out".<sup>8</sup> There exists then a spatial ambiguity if, as Bachelard suggests, we imagine ourselves in the warmth of the circle of light that metaphorically exists at the heart of the house, but are watched and sequestered by the light it emits and ultimately remain outside.

Foucault examines the spatial properties of light and control in his analysis of Bentham's Panopticon, which he sees as a paradigm for institutional control. He maps it to other institutional uses and 'scopic regimes'<sup>9</sup> concluding that "Visibility is a trap".<sup>10</sup> One can, however, observe a correlation between the 'trap' of visibility that Foucault identifies and that of performative spaces. The invisibility that darkness affords identifies the audience. The Panopticon provided a space that served a dual purpose: its architecture was set out with a central tower where a guard would watch inmates arranged in individual cells around the periphery. The surveillance by the guard represented the institutional control, which was intended to modify the inmates' behaviour. However, the spaces arranged in this manner and lit from behind by windows in the exterior wall were also theatrical making a performer of each inmate. The light reveals each cell and identifies each occupant as a prisoner. Each space can be identified by the intensity and direction of the light that illuminates it, and that light can be instrumentalised by institutional control.

The house was different, normally considered a place of refuge and spatial autonomy, though this too had its areas of insecurity (as C.J. Jung suggests):<sup>11</sup> the polarised spaces of the attic and basement, the two places where the servants would primarily live and work in an English stately home. There are also domestic spaces for both employers and employees in which they intersect at different points, occupying the same space but for different reasons, one to serve and the other to be served. Both groups would therefore treat the space quite differently; the employers (let us say the upper classes) occupy space often oblivious to the presence of the other, whereas

the servants are always aware of their own visibility. This becomes even more apparent at night when light begins to separate spaces, lit from un-lit, creating areas where identity becomes associated with the levels of visibility the light and darkness affords.

In *The Remains of the Day*, for instance, the butler Stevens describes the anxiety of visibility. In a large room he is waiting on two diners in a space that the light has made difficult for him to negotiate.

On that occasion, much of the room was in darkness, and the two gentlemen were sitting side by side midway down the table – it being much too broad to allow them to sit facing one another – within the pool of light cast by the candles on the table and the crackling hearth opposite. I decided to minimize my presence by standing in the shadows much further away than I might usually have done.<sup>12</sup>

He clearly feels easier in the anonymity created by the shadows, feeling 'trapped' in the light of the candles, his presence made explicit, entering into a spatial relationship with the two diners. He then has difficulty with the transition from one state to another, from the darkness into the light, which is surely a metaphor for the book as a whole.

The arc of Stevens's story traces his situation from a mute observer of 'Negative Capability', which Keats describes as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason"<sup>13</sup> to the realisation that his marginal life in the service of others has left him unable to act on his own behalf. He revisits this situation at different points in the book, mapping his journey from darkness to the enlightenment of self-knowledge, epitomised in the final scene by his reaction to the switching on of the lights on Weymouth pier.

Stevens' exile, though, is self-imposed. He exists on the edge of things, subjugating his sense of self almost completely into the role he has created, that of an automaton. As we can see in the scene in the dining room described above, he stands on the edge of the light, a voyeur whose particular fetish is the repression of emotion.<sup>14</sup>

Berberich suggests that the only indication of his true feeling occurs when he again enters the room after hearing of his father's death,<sup>15</sup> seeing "a forest of black dinner jackets, grey hair and cigar smoke".<sup>16</sup> Again he stands on the edge of darkness, this time though with the determination of an explorer: "he wended his way past the

gentlemen, searching for glasses to replenish",<sup>17</sup> concerned only with his sense of purpose and inanimate objects.

Darkness can be a refuge as it was for Stevens; however, as Burke suggests darkness can also be capable of generating feelings of the sublime and light itself is so commonplace as to make little impression on the mind. Light, he goes on to say, if too intense, can overwhelm the mind and the sharp transition from one state to another (light to dark and dark to light) can be startling.<sup>18</sup> Darkness, when complete, also closes spatial phenomenology and as such inverts the locus of perception to a partial sensory deprivation. A state in which images cease to bombard the mind, "where the brain is [...]" as Deleuze suggests, "[...] an interval, a gap between action and reaction. [...] It constitutes a centre of indetermination in an acentred universe of images."<sup>19</sup> This interval may have been the moment Burke was describing, a moment of inner stasis, a 'sublime moment' between different conscious states, between 'action and reaction'. Roger Caillois uses the term "*legendary psychasthenia*"<sup>20</sup> to express the dissolution of spatial boundaries between self and environment and finds Eugene Minkowski's analysis of schizophrenia useful to describe the 'assimilation into space' a schizophrenic may experience. He adds that darkness has a

positive quality [... it] is 'thick'; it directly touches a person, enfolds, penetrates, and even passes through him. Thus the 'self is *permeable* to the dark but not to light'; [... therefore] the role played by the inner/outer distinction and thus by the sensory organs as well [... becomes] minimal.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than the dislocating effect that light might have he here sees the subject become at one with the environment.

The transitions between different perceptive phenomenological states was what concerned Walter Benjamin. When writing about a trip to Naples in 1924 he identifies a concept Asja Lacis described as 'porosity' where in the city at night there are no discernable boundaries between inside and out, a kind of spatial anarchy. As Gilloch suggests, this "directs attention to a number of motifs. With respect to the physical structure of the city, it highlights the notions of dislocation and disorientation within an urban environment."<sup>22</sup> The disorientation that Gilloch identifies in Benjamin's analysis is one of identification. One finds a different situation from Caillois in that the ceaseless movement between spaces creates a dizzying

array of possible spaces with which to identify: inside/outside, public/private, state/church.

Victor Burgin [discussing Benjamin] states,

In this space it is not simply that the boundaries are 'porous', but that the space itself is soluble. This space is the source of bliss and terror, of the 'oceanic' feeling, and of the feeling of coming apart; just as it is in the origins of the feelings being invaded, overwhelmed, suffocated.<sup>23</sup>

'Bliss and terror' might easily describe the sensation of being in total darkness where physical boundaries dissolve into the surrounding space, creating, as Burgin suggests, a dichotomy between the 'oceanic' feeling of limitless dark, inspiring terror, and the intimacy and suffocation inspiring bliss.

The porous nature of both public and private space at night also poses a problem for the photographic image, where the slippage between light and dark is brought about not by any philosophical construct but by the limitations of technology. Consequently, this leads to selection and control of the limits of what is visible (in the image), and therefore what is ultimately recorded becomes its hegemonic subject even in instances where this subject is a fraction of the frame. However, new technologies have allowed a much simpler way to overcome this by layering different exposures to compensate for the extremes of contrast found at night. This, though, adds elements of temporal and spatial compression, which is not within the scope of this paper.

Notions of interpenetration suggest boundaries, territories with some investment of the individual in each. Some of the photographic work I have done recently explores this concept, specifically the transition between public and private spaces and the interpenetration of one into another, blurring these perceived boundaries. It is a symptom of anxieties that exist in some quarters about the reaches of visibility and its effect on notions of the private (hidden) self.



**Fig. 2: Hall, Mark (2006) *Untitled #1*<sup>24</sup>**

In *Untitled #1* the porous nature of the street at night to which Benjamin refers is evident: light emanates from the window, inverting the situation of daylight. One feels drawn to the light, to its inclusion; however, each area – the street and the interior – is separate. They are separated by their very nature and their hegemony. The brightness of the interior has primacy over the gloom of the street, its utilitarian function; life, quite literally, is inside. As a consequence, viewers find themselves, perhaps unwillingly, in the position of a voyeur since this is the selection the camera and its technologies have made (quite apart from those of the photographer).

The intimacy of dark space is what is at the heart of *Western Deep* (2002) by British-born artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen.<sup>25</sup> The work was commissioned to document conditions in South Africa's deepest mine Western Deep to undertake the "representation of nearness as the dominant mode of understanding the present condition of globalization".<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that what emerges in the opening minutes of the film is the spatial disorientation of darkness. The viewer is also assailed by the screech and grind of heavy machinery which, in the darkness of the auditorium, echoes the situation of the miners as they travel below

ground in the cage lift. The miners themselves are also in close proximity to each other in the darkness, sharing a spatial sense of community, their silence punctuated only by the shriek of the winding mechanism and the random flashes of their helmet lamps making small details specific. These details become monumental in scale, as they are the only pieces of information by which the miners can locate each other in the dark. This sense of dislocation and spatial separation from the light locates us as viewers (and the miners) in the suffocating and claustrophobic darkness. The isolation and fracture of peering into the small patches of light is at odds with the 'communion' of the dark and erases any racial, or social divisions, which only become apparent in the light. However, in this dark place, light still stands in for the power of the mine owners, who literally own the power. Kate Kellaway commented in *The Observer* in 2002,<sup>27</sup> "This is the darkest film I have ever seen. A lift descends blindly, goes miles underground, carrying its workers – and us with them – like damned men. We long for the light [...]." Accompanied by the screeching mechanical sounds and occasional flashes of light the screen and the auditorium are closed in claustrophobic darkness – gone is the spatial harmony that Caillios referred to.

The camera becomes a co-conspirator in the anxiety choosing to film the darkness. It inverts the representation of Plato's cave and the normal situations of the cinematic experience. If what we see is darkness where there should be light, the implication is that this darkness represents reality. It certainly does for the miners, who are expected to descend into this damp darkness every day.

In *Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald also sees the darkness at a distance – "[a]s darkness closed in from the horizon like a noose being tightened",<sup>28</sup> placing himself in the light as the noose tightens around him. Here the protagonist is on an island of light but is surrounded by a darkness that will inevitably overwhelm him. Another example of Sebald's use of light is the description of Somerleyton house at night "when the incomparable glasshouses, borne on cast iron pillars and braces and seemingly weightless in their filigree grace, shed their gleaming radiance on the dark [... –] an oriental palace in a fairy tale",<sup>29</sup> a beacon, though this time of fantasy, of the imagination that the reality of economics eventually snuffed out.



Sebald's darkness in *Rings of Saturn* is linked with that of Joseph Conrad (another exile), with whom Sebald had an affinity. There are examples of a more explicit pairing of their situations: "In the evenings, when the darkness settled upon the sea, he will have strolled along the esplanade, a twenty-one-year-old foreigner alone amongst the English."<sup>30</sup> The implicit identification here is with the otherness of darkness as an indistinct state that exists within and has a visible expression at dusk, a time when we are reminded of our own fears and capacity for evil, throughout the book Sebald to the 'heart of the dark continent' as distant, advancing over the sea towards him on the land, though for Conrad it was only too close: "A dark figure obscured the lighted doorway of the manager's hut, vanished, then, a second or so after, the doorway itself vanished too."<sup>31</sup> The moral decay in society links both books as the edges between fantasy and reality, between commerce and humanity are blurred. Both are solitary travellers and exiles in their own way, always on the edge of things, in the light but not of it, commenting on others who find themselves in the same position.

Chateaubriand's father, Sebald writes,

paced up and down the enormous dining hall until it was time for bed [...] Once he was at a certain distance from the centre of the hall, which was lit only by the flickering fire in the hearth and a solitary candle, he would begin to disappear into the shadows, and, when he was completely immersed in the darkness, all one would hear was his footfall until he came back like a ghost in his peculiar attire.<sup>32</sup>

It is in the darkness that meaning itself becomes porous, indicated by the envelopment in darkness of Chateaubriand's father, who is isolated and alone in a cavernous house: "Those who walked beneath its vaults felt much as one might when entering a Carthusian monastery."<sup>33</sup> He would have been aware of the collapsing of space, feeling less isolated and alone in the darkness.

Light and its captor, the photograph, have an unusual relationship in that both are often invisible. One looks at artificial light and what it reveals but seldom notices the quality or direction and indeed who has placed the light and for what purpose. This, though, is a key element in the establishment of perceived identity in contrast to how one might identify oneself. As I have shown, how one negotiates this spatial relationship can determine one's identification with such things as suspicion (search lights), sexual

availability (red light district), commerce (shop windows and neon signs), fear and security (outdoor domestic PIR lights) etc. Artificial light also has associations with theatrical space and therefore attracts mute observation such as photography or surveillance cameras. Some artists have exploited this implicit understanding and have subverted surveillance footage (The Surveillance Camera Players) or have coerced the camera into recording everyday occurrences, lifting them out of the ordinary temporal flow and remarking on their specificity. The space of the photograph has also often collapsed, becoming for some 'a window on the world'. Although this relationship has been more exhaustively examined, the light that is at its heart has been generally regarded solely for its technical contribution rather than its hegemony. However, control of light has been a fundamental aspect of photography since its inception. Its relationship with truth is also bound up with much of what we believe (or used to believe) about news or documentary photography – a relationship that is at best uneasy and at worst corrupt.

Artificial light itself is too often placed in such a way as to represent what is already believed about something. One may, for instance, consider the difference in lighting between police 'mug shots' and children's school photographs – both taken in a similar manner but with very different outcomes (The photographs of Jamie Bulger's killers are just one example.)<sup>34</sup> Although the differences are often subtle, photographers have known since the beginning how to light to flatter or to critique and how to choose the quality of light to the best advantage. Over the years, light and its source have been enslaved to underpin theological and ideological philosophies for different purposes; more recently, photography has become a silent partner.

Things that fall outside of this circle of light are often marginalised, as fear of the unknown grips even the most robust cultures. The desire though to know and to see or witness, drives much cultural output, and the anxiety of not knowing or being able to control through vision drives politics. Darkness then, one supposes, will become the refuge, the spiritual home of the private, the unseen and un-surveilled as the backlash against total visibility begins.

## Notes

- 1 Foucault (1980: 154).
- 2 Habermas (1989: 30).
- 3 Schivelbusch (1988: 98).
- 4 The exact number is 3,528.
- 5 Schivelbusch (1989: 97-98), emphasis in the original.
- 6 Bachelard (1994: 34).
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 The term 'scopic regime' appears in an essay by Martin Jay entitled "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" (in Foster [1988]).
- 10 Foucault (1977: 200).  
In this book Foucault specifically discusses the advances made in penal reform from the dungeon to more open types of confinement, where (as in Bentham's Panopticon) prisoners are subjected to the constant and invasive regard by the prison guard situated in a central tower and isolated from the prisoners.
- 11 Quoted in Bachelard (1994: 18-19).
- 12 Ishiguro (1989: 72).
- 13 Expressed in a letter to his brother dated 28 December 1817.
- 14 Repression (noun):  
"1. Being kept down by force [...] 2. Psychological protective mechanism: in Freudian psychology, a mechanism by which people protect themselves from threatening thoughts by blocking them out of the conscious mind [...]." (Encarta Dictionary)
- 15 Berberich (2007: 145).
- 16 Ishiguro (1989: 106).
- 17 *Ibid.* 106-107.
- 18 Burke (1998: 121).
- 19 Deleuze (1986: 62-63).
- 20 Minkowski, "Le Problème du temps en psychopathologie" (1932-33), quoted in Caillois (2003: 100), emphasis in the original.
- 21 *Ibid.* 100-101, emphasis in the original.
- 22 Gilloch (1996: 25).
- 23 Burgin (1996: 155).
- 24 Hall, M (2006) *Untitled #1*, (Original in colour).
- 25 Commissioned by Okwui Enwezor for Documenta XI Exhibition, 2002.
- 26 Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box", quoted in Demos (2005: 63).
- 27 Kellaway (2002).
- 28 Sebald (2002: 229).
- 29 *Ibid.* 34-35.
- 30 *Ibid.* 113.
- 31 Conrad (1989: 60).
- 32 Sebald (2002: 258).
- 33 *Ibid.* 258.

34 <http://www.inewscatcher.com/timages/2beed13e73fe683a3ca14c16053b4bc4.jpg> (10 December 2009) and [http://img.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2008/03\\_01/killersL0203\\_468x396.jpg](http://img.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2008/03_01/killersL0203_468x396.jpg) (10 December 2009).

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