

# INVISIBLE RELATIONSHIPS: LIGHT, ART AND POLITICS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

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*The illuminated window as stage, the street as theatre and the passers-by as audience – this is the scene of big city night life.*

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (1988, p.148)

## **Introduction**

In this paper I will try to propose that some lighting techniques used in theatre to create a visual hierarchy on stage may have a parallel in urban lighting as a technique of attracting the gaze to points of interest of the capitalist system at night. To accomplish this attempt, I will base myself in the research for my master thesis called *Invisible Relationships: Light, Art and Politics in the Public Space*, where I have studied the development of public lighting and proposed that it is greatly directed to surveillance and commercial interests. During this practice based research I developed a photographic work I would like to present here called *Follow Spot* where I used to walk at night with a torch, through the streets of Porto, directing light towards dark spaces, to document what is left forgotten by the city lighting. The idea of this work came from my own experience as a

theatre lighting designer where one of my “functions” is to concentrate spectators attention where it needs to be.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the industrialization of light, we spent most of our time in artificially lit spaces, that is, spaces illuminated by manufactured light sources that, in addition to having limits in relation to natural light, are often chosen and controlled by wills unrelated to ours, such as in the case of public space, commercial spaces and offices.

Light, if not natural light that exists independently of us, but artificial light, created and maintained by us, not only follows technical principles, but also political principles that are not so evident. Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, writes that the first mistake in interpreting spaces is to regard them as neutral receptacles within which objects and activities take place (1991). If we assume that these spaces are not neutral, the light that illuminates them cannot be either. As light is so important in the visual construction of spaces and, therefore, in our social and subjective experience of spaces, the questions that Lefebvre poses: who promotes this, who explores it and how is it done, becomes very pertinent in light analysis.

If we think of the night as a space/time that is almost fully perceived through artificial light and, at the same time, consider the multiple ways light can change our perception, we can get an idea of the extent to which light can have an influence upon us.

### **Surveillance and Trade**

Jonathan Crary notes, in *Techniques of the Observer* (2017)<sup>1</sup>, the disdain Foucault purposely imprints in *Discipline and Punish* (1977)<sup>2</sup> on the expression ‘society of the spectacle’, famously coined by Guy Debord (2003). Foucault writes that

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<sup>1</sup> The author mentions here the Portuguese edition entitled “Técnicas do Observador” as shown in the references.

<sup>2</sup> The author mentions here the Brazilian edition entitled “Vigiar e Punir: O Nascimento da Prisão” as shown in the references.



Figure 1. Tomás Ribas, *Follow Spot*, 2019

our society is the society of vigilance, not that of spectacle. But, as Crary points out, the models of surveillance and spectacle, far from being contradictory, are perfectly complementary. If the body is object of institutional vigilance, which aims to impose discipline and, at the same time, produce knowledge about its behaviour, as Foucault points out, the eye has, as Crary argues, being itself subject of scientific interest as well as subject of control technics.

A similar relationship could be made between street lighting, which, as Schivelbusch noted, first appeared as a organised system in Paris during Luis XIV reign under the responsibility of the police (1988, p.86), aiming for bodies' surveillance, and comercial lighting, more focused in attracting the attention of the eyes. Without ever abandoning surveillance, the spectacle is always present, sometimes in support of consumption, as in shopping centres, casinos and over-lit entertainment places, sometimes to enhance the power of state institutions and large corporations.

In this sense, shop windows' private lighting and public lighting complement each other perfectly. Light provided by poles, which allows a view of the spatial context, creates a foundation to enable the lighting of stores, facades and monuments to attract the eye in a much more efficient way than during the day, and at the same time leaves all the space visible in order to impose visibility on its users. Schivelbusch observes this complementarity between the two forms of lighting in a very pertinent way:

*Commercial light is to police light what bourgeois society is to the state. As the State, in its appropriately named 'night-watchman', function guarantees the security that bourgeois society needs to pursue its business interests, so public lighting creates the framework of security within which commercial lighting can unfold. (1988, p.142)*

Guy Debord says that the spectacle is precisely the domination of all social life, including its visibility, by consumption: *'The spectacle is the moment when commodity reaches total occupation of social life. All this is perfectly visible in relation to commodity, because nothing else is seen but the commodity: the visible world is its world'*<sup>3</sup> (2003, p.32). Commercial lighting works, in conjunction with other mechanisms to reinforce this dominance of merchandise at night.

Robert Williams (2008) draws attention to the fact that lighting can work together with advertising and with discourses on ways of living and being at night to direct people to certain places chosen by the government and large corporations. Street lighting, boulevards and highways help people on the way home, work and consumer places, commercial streets are brighter than residential ones, poor neighbourhoods receive a qualitatively worse light than rich neighbourhoods. Commercial centres are extremely brighter, attracting consumers and making rest time productive again as it becomes time to consume.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from the Brazilian edition by the author.



Figure 2. Tomás Ribas, *Follow Spot*, 2019

### **Focus and Composition**

What I would like to note here is the similarity between the kind of balance (with the commercial light emphasis) I see in urban lighting and technics of focus and composition in stage lighting.

There are many reasons why a spectator's eyes are oriented to an action or place on stage and light is not the only force to drive it. As Richard H. Palmer notes in *The Lighting Art: The Aesthetics of Stage Lighting Design* (1994), the expectation of something to happen or the knowledge about the play can make the audience search for an actor on stage independently of the light but it is unequivocal that brighter places have an attractive force to the eye.

As Palmer observes there are different features that are responsible for drawing attention to a certain place like brightness, color, movement and area size. Something can trigger attention because it is brighter, or because it has a more saturated color or because it is in constant movement like neon signs or because

it has more than one of these features at the same time. Regardless of these attributes however, *'The more discordant a stimulus is in relation to its environment, the more it will draw attention'* (1994, p.141).

In theatre, this discordant stimulus can be achieved by illuminating the key area of the stage with a strong or less dimmed fixture than the rest of the stage, or with a contrasting color, or even with a softer one but before everything we usually are already in a darkened audience.

If, with a lit-up audience area, the theatre was a place of social interaction, without audience lighting its character changes completely. What happens on stage overlaps what happens in the audience and the spectators' eyes are drawn to the scene. Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes that:

*The spectator in the dark is alone with himself and the illuminated image, because social connections cease to exist in the dark. Darkness heightens individual perceptions, magnifying them many times. The darkened auditorium gives the illuminated image an intensity that it would not otherwise possess.* (Schivelbusch, 1988, p.221)

As the audience's darkness increases the power of perception, light onstage unbalances the balance of power in the visual field, favouring the conduction of vision.

Similarly, on an urban context, the night itself creates the same kind of opportunity and the light of the spectacle, not a neutral light, but a very ideological one, creates a visual hierarchy focusing light on certain places. Schivelbusch cites a 1926 advertising handbook that says that shop windows should not be evenly illuminated, but instead products should receive more focused lights in order to stand out (1988, p.148).

If we also think that according to James J. Gibson in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1986) the eyes are part of a system, being as they are on a moving head and a moving body, we can think about how this body's movement,



Figure 3. Tomás Ribas, *Follow Spot*, 2019

whether from the eye, the head or the whole body is, despite being informed by context, guided by detail vision, which is narrower and needs greater light intensities. The contrast of light and shadow provided by night light is a true narrative designed to guide the eye to certain places.

I believe there is a close relationship between the accumulated knowledge of how our vision works and the way night light has established itself. As I understand urban lighting, there is a relationship between the supposedly public light provided by the state and private light, each one with its own concerns and characteristics, but with common interests. As Schivelbusch (1988) notes, the light of the police and the light of commerce complement each other.

The ultimate goal of street lighting is the abolition of darkness to support police work at times when their work is impaired and perhaps more “necessary” as social self-regulation, which is stronger during the day, becomes more fragile at night. The light of commerce, however, makes good use of darkness as it uses

the shadows to gain attention more easily than during the day. If street lighting tries to diffuse light as evenly as possible into all spaces, consumer lighting makes an effort instead to create light points, such as in shop windows and advertising materials, to get the attention of passersby and sell their products. There is then a balance for street lighting, between a level of illumination that is higher enough to not allow groups of people unwanted by the commerce but not so high to disturb consumption. In any case, it seems clear to me that there is an equilibrium relationship between diffuse light and accent light, which evidently is not only exercised by commerce, but also by the State, as in the case of monuments and government buildings. If we make an analogy with the theatre, this balance is a dim light that illuminates the scene and the actors as a whole plus a strong but focused light where the most important action for the narrative is going on.

### **Follow Spot**

During the research for my master thesis I did many night time excursions to observe the light in the city of Porto and surroundings. I started observing and taking photographs in order to document the lighting of the city and the changes I could see in different neighbourhoods. One thing that interested me was, as I developed before, the balance between street lighting and commercial lighting and the impact it does in our visual field at night.

As I observed, shop windows, public buildings, corporate logos, advertising, monuments, landmark sites, restaurants, usually have a difference in color or luminance in a concentrated place that puts them visually above its surroundings. It creates strong points of attention, like islands (or a lighthouse) in the ocean. On Avenida dos Aliados, we can clearly see the effort to highlight the town hall, just as on the shores of Vila Nova de Gaia, port wine brands remain present at night through illuminated signs. The Luis I bridge has a light that illuminates the floor for pedestrians who stop to see the view without dazzling their eyes and Porto's downtown has much of its space illuminated by amber lights. Some old



Figure 4. Tomás Ribas, *Follow Spot*, 2019

neon signs still exist, such as the Sá da Bandeira drugstore, next to new shops and restaurants with newer attention-grabbing techniques. The amount of white light illuminating the billboards of the Bolhão market does not let the night erase the rehabilitation that takes place there.

Elsewhere in the city the situation is quite different. The Avenida da República, in Vila Nova de Gaia has a diffuse and constant lighting with high poles that diffuses the light to the maximum “flattening” the avenue. The El Corte Inglés brand, lit on its roof, marks its presence all night but on the ground floor, while there are advertising inviting potential consumers with sales, a row of white light directed to the square discourages its use during the night. On side streets like Rua do General Torres, vacant land and abandoned old farms are forgotten, completely in the dark. Light creates an edition of what we see. It picks points of interest and transforms the visible, creating a new visual reality of the night space.

Interested in experimenting with this kind of equilibrium a I started a practice with the aim of unbalancing in some way the visual hierarchy created by night light. The practice was simply to walk at night carrying a flashlight with me so I could illuminate dark spaces when shooting, in an attempt to re-balance what is seen and what is unseen.

As it is possible to see in the images, part of the urban structure disappears at night: vacant terrain, wild plants, waste from buildings that are not considered heritage sites, squares that cannot be entered at night, political messages, graffiti, become dark, as well as all places one should not go. Some passages become invisible to those who do not know them by limiting movement to certain paths. Later I named the photographs produced *Follow Spot*. Follow spot is a lighting equipment used in theatre and concerts to follow the main star of the show, such as the protagonist of a musical or the lead singer of a rock band. Unlike a conventional spotlight, which has a fixed focus, the follow spot is controlled by an operator to keep the “star” always illuminated and detached from whole. The spot thus keeps our focus where it should be, controlling the direction of our gaze.

Almost like a “rebel” follow spot, which breaks free from its script and turns to the backstage, I lit the darkest places in my surroundings with my flashlight and photographed it to make apparent what was invisible, rebalancing the visual field. My objective with this practice was not to propose how the light should be but to open a reflection about the priorities of urban lighting and its ideology.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I tried to propose similarities between theatre and street lighting, more precisely, on how both uses the concentration of light in certain places and the contrast with the surrounding ambient as a tool to attract attention.

If the theatre commonly use focus and composition to lead the eye due to a dramaturgical idea, urban lighting, in a more decentralised way, uses a similar mechanism to conduct city dwellers attention to certain places.

As we have seen, the State and large corporations try to impose themselves on this night space, manipulating our sight, sustaining historical narratives, attracting or distancing inhabitants and tourists from certain places (stigmatising or promoting these places), facilitating production and stimulating consumption. Urban light is thus largely subjected to surveillance, production and consumption, and with it the nocturnal landscape of its inhabitants.

With my creative practice I tried to expose, in some way, how this logic permeate urban lighting in the city of Porto exploring what is in the shadows. Carrying a flashlight created the possibility to wander through off-grid places, to choose what to illuminate and so what to see at night. To choose what to illuminate in an urban context where a lighting system is already working creates an awareness about the priorities of urban lighting.

Light emitted by artificial sources, and the transformation it causes in spaces, objects and people, cannot be analysed only aesthetically, but, on the contrary, needs to be analysed in the social consequences of its action. When the use of light is subjected to the logic production / consumption / surveillance, it implies that all possible influence that light can have on our social interactions is subject to this logic.

The objective here was not a proposition of how it should be but an attempt of a reflection. A reflection about lighting ideology and the potential it has in dragging attention.

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