

DOCTORAL THESIS

On Lightscapes: Exploring the Aesthetics and Narrativities of Light and Colour in Contemporary Hong Kong

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Date of Award:
2021

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Abstract

Originating in a consideration of the aesthetic concept of atmosphere, this research seeks to investigate how light is more than a physical matter or circumstance. Rather, it should be conceived as an aesthetic perception and a cultural experience that frames allusions of site and context, integrating them in an atmospheric narration situated in the context of contemporary Hong Kong.

Light is an everyday phenomenon, yet it remains an intangible ‘material’ that is hard to apprehend. We intuitively associate light with vision, though we do not see light itself. Light is the medium within which our sight takes place, and we see but its reflections and its varying degrees of brightness.¹ We see illuminated things and not light.²

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe has already established in his *Theory of Colour* that light is the pre-condition for the phenomenon of colours.³ What we perceive through degrees of brightness is a mixture of colours, each defined by a different electromagnetic wavelength emitted by the source of light and reflected by some kind of surface. Seeing, or rather perceiving light and colour is a neuro-biological process: light hits the photo sensitive retina at the back of our eyes where receptors pick up the signal and pass it on to the brain for processing. How we ultimately perceive and understand the processed information exceeds neuro-biological functions and moves into domains of sensual affect and cultural apprehension. James Gibson contends that because this process in the brain, our perception of the visual world, is a phenomenal experience, we may never be impartial or neutral when considering light.⁴ Similarly, Kalekin-Fishman and Low confirm that we acquire knowledge “of how meanings are created by ties with people and places” through our senses⁵ – in the case of light through sight.

The geographer Dennis Cosgrove distinguishes vision – as opposed to sight – to be culturally conditioned, a socio-psychological extension of perception. Vision is related to what we see and how our images, imaginations and our imagination’s representations overlap.⁶ We perceive conceptions of our environment.⁷ As such, our relationship with light, the way we live within it and the manner in which it shapes our identities is a subject of cultural and historical enquiry.⁸

Lightscares – a term that describes our lit environment that is generated, shaped and influenced by natural light and artificial light – is a concept that implies a collective cultural dimension that “impairs the depth

¹ Despite the fact that we associate light with vision, the common knowledge is that we cannot see light itself. We see things in light. The light-sensitive receptors in the eyes can only detect light as reflections. It seems a paradox that light is defined specifically as that which we see. Gernot Böhme, “Seeing Light,” in *Colours Between Light and Darkness* (Zürich: Niggli Verlag, 2006), 115.

² Please refer to the quote by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe the penultimate page (page 188).

³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe’s Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840).

⁴ James J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Compan, 1950), 51–55.

⁵ Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E. Y. Low, eds., *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 2.

⁶ Denis Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision. Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2008), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a4007ob>.

⁷ Ólafur Eliasson and Tor Nørretranders, *Light! On Light in Life and the Life in Light* (Klampenborg: Forlaget Tor.dk, 2015), 21.

⁸ The relationship of light, material culture and social experience has been discussed by Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen, “An Anthropology of Luminosity: The Agency of Light,” *Journal of Material Culture* 12, no. 3 (November 11, 2007): 263–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183507081894>.

and diversity of this experience,” says Edensor.⁹ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the German philosopher who argues for the recognition of aesthetics as an academic discipline in its own right, describes knowledge as something that implies a coherent intuitive understanding which is given to us directly by sense experiences.¹⁰ Lightscares and their perception qualify as sensuous knowledge and the appraisal and study of such entails the development of culturally specific aesthetics unique to their place. They may reveal knowledge and insight about our everyday life, about our behaviour and conceptions of our environment. In lightscares light may become an experiential carrier of meaning that narrates the quotidian in a culturally specific way; they are comprehensive tools that aid in our understanding of the visual, the tangible as well as the intangible and experiential aspects of the places we inhabit.

The exploration of lightscares evolves alongside theory and practice-based research. To begin, a visual ethnographic investigation of Hong Kong’s lightscares will be traced, analysed and then expanded through creative practice. In additional artistic research, conducted through smaller artworks as well as exhibition contexts, the phenomenon of light and colour is probed to substantiate how and what we perceive in light and lightscares. The outcome of this research – the *Lightscape Sequence ‘Fragrant Harbour’* – is an artistic experiment, an investigation to attune to and think with light: from understanding light and colours in their natural and artificial forms in the context of contemporary Hong Kong to translating the found lightscares into an embodied and reflective installation reflecting a diversity of narratives.

Key Words

atmosphere, spatial qualities, light, colour, perception, aesthetics, narrativity, site-specific art, lightscape, light art

⁹ Tim Edensor, “The Gloomy City: Rethinking the Relationship Between Light and Dark,” *Urban Studies* 52, no. 3 (February 24, 2015): 432, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013504009>.

¹⁰ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Texte Zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, ed. and trans. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.28937/978-3-7873-2574-0>.