

## Looking in the dark: on artificial darkness in art and theatre

A new book by Noam Elcott unearths the role of mediated darkness in cultural history

by Pac Pobric | 28 July 2016 | The Art Newspaper



*Theatre-goers sit in the dark*

Although there are no prescriptions in the art historian Noam Elcott's new book, *Artificial Darkness*, which traces the role of darkness in the development of film, modern theatre, photography and other media, there is in it the faint whisper of an enduring question, which he poses in his introduction: "How does one best live in a world of images?" "The historical avant-gardes are simply unthinkable without a world, a life, already suffused with images of greater and lesser artistry," he writes. "The fusion of art and life not only was an aim of the avant-gardes; it was also their condition of possibility."

This point is the first of many productive turns. Throughout his book, which roughly spans the long 19th century (1789-1914), Elcott disabuses us of the assumption that darkness was the prerequisite for any single medium: there were photographs before darkrooms and films and operas before there were dimmed theatres. "Prior to the Wagnerian darkness revolution, the auditorium—contrary to its name—was a space to see and be seen, two aims that were often in conflict," Elcott writes. "At baroque court theatres, attention was generally divided between the spectacle on stage and the sovereign duke or king", which meant that "lighting was equally and—from a modern perspective—bizarrely balanced between stage and auditorium".

Darkness comes later, slowly, through fits and starts, long conversations and trips to patent offices. It "has a history and a uniquely modern form", Elcott writes, which means that it was never the essence of any medium. For Elcott, there is no such thing; there are only historically-conditioned principles that are always subject to change. If you look at history, Michel Foucault wrote in an essay on Nietzsche, you find "not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that [it has] no essence or that [its] essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms."

Elcott takes this point seriously. His study on darkness is "anchored not in the false bedrock of ontology but in an ocean of discourse and praxis". In a chapter on theatres, he writes of the moral panic that emerged in the 1910s over the idea that men and women would sit together in darkened rooms. In 1914, the German sociologist Emilie Altenloh complained: "eroticism is, of course, the main reason many of them go to the cinema". She added: "for all lovers, the darkened cinemas are a popular place to spend time. 'Come inside, our cinema is the darkest in town,' is how one entrepreneur extols the virtues of his establishment." To placate the moralists, the Motion Picture Patents Company developed theatres suffused with green and amber lighting. "The entire moralizing assault was often but a thinly veiled screed against the lower classes," Elcott writes.

Here, as elsewhere, artificial darkness is part of an ideological constellation. Its presence in theatres and darkrooms is nominal; its real power is "between media", Elcott writes, in the world of politics. In fact, as far as Elcott is concerned, "there are no media," at least not—and here he quotes the philosopher Joseph Vogl—"in a substantial and historically stable sense."

It is this instability that makes Elcott allergic to that "false bedrock of ontology" that he laments in other writers. He is not impressed, for example, with Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida* (1980), in which the writer meditates on the nature of photography through the death of his mother. "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child", Barthes writes, "I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."

Elcott does not believe that any art can sustain such overtures. His book dispenses with Barthes's metaphysics in favour of Foucault's archaeology, in which the scholar's job is to dig through the historical record to reveal its ideological foundations. This befits an historian, and it has led, in this case, to a book that provides a genuinely new perspective on "an obscure history of Modern art and media," as the subtitle has it.

Yet in this approach, much is lost, including any sense of urgency. For Elcott, as for Foucault, nothing is of perennial relevance because all things are temporary constructions. "The uniquely modern forms of darkness enumerated throughout this book are now historical," Elcott writes in his final chapter. "Separately and in

aggregate, darkrooms, cinemas, and black screens figure marginally, if at all, in the production and circulation of contemporary media images and subjects." What we have, in the end, is an historical book in the most traditional sense, one that charts the past in all its foreignness.

Perhaps it is unfair to ask of the historian that he wander beyond his jurisdiction to make larger claims—but just the same, it is impossible to restrain the thought. It was a supra-historical tendency that provoked Barthes to his most productive reflections. The same spirit animated Susan Sontag when she began an essay with this ontological declaration: "To collect photographs is to collect the world." And a similar disregard for history underpinned Walter Benjamin's anxiety about the Daguerreotype when he wrote that it "records our likeness without returning our gaze."

Such sweeping thoughts are too much for Elcott; they make false essence out of historical contingency. Yet history can also trap us in. It can make our focus too narrow. Then Elcott's most enduring question, the one with the greatest weight—"How does one best live in a world of images?"—becomes easy to wave away. We could say it is too broad, or too aloof from specific historical conditions. But what use is history if it does enliven broader philosophical inquiry? When history becomes too local an affair, it is the conceit of an antiquarian who prizes the past for its novelty alone. And antiquarian history, as Nietzsche wrote, "no longer inspires and fills with enthusiasm the fresh life of the present." He knew that the only path forward was to lose oneself in speculation: "In an excess of history, the human being stops once again; without that cover of the unhistorical he would never have started or dared to start."

**Artificial Darkness: an Obscure History of Modern Art and Media**

**Noam Elcott**

**University of Chicago Press, 312pp, \$45**