Looking Into the Abyss

16. German design has been a major influence on postmodern design, just as the designs of the Berliner Ensemble were a major influence on American design in the 1960s.
23. Brecht on Theatre, 159–60.

One Hundred Years of Stage Lighting
Why We Cannot Light as Appia Did

Daylight is not at our command. Although we can dim it (drapes, colored glass, etc.) we cannot control daylight itself and modify its proportions at will. We must, therefore, turn to artificial light created by ourselves, i.e., stage lighting. For our eyes, this light is to the simple light of day what, for our ears, the art of sounds is to shouting. It will be the aesthetic ruler of brightness—capable of modifying its vibrations.

—Adolphe Appia, "Eurhythmics and Light," 1912

Now, God be praised, that to believing souls
Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair!

—Shakespeare, King Henry VI, Part 2

The images we create upon the stage are inevitably codified reflections of the world around us, and thus informed by contemporary sensibilities. The conventions and scenic techniques developed by theater artists at any given moment in history are employed to create a theatrical milieu that we in the audience accept as a sign or representation of our environment. The scenic illusionism of the nineteenth century, for instance, was, among other things, an inevitable product of the industrial and scientific revolutions, the growth of antiquarian studies, and a concomitant fascination with technology and spectacle. The subsequent abstract and symbolic scenography of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the other hand, was a reflection of new psychological explorations of the inner workings of the mind, a discovery of Asian arts and philosophies that emphasized the spiritual and the emblematic, and new developments in scientific inquiry that would soon lead to attempts to explain the cosmos as part of a unified system.

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Light is obviously a part of the visual environment of the stage and a powerful, if often subtle, factor in spectators’ overall perceptions of the theatrical event. While much of the history of stage lighting, of course, is integrally tied to developments in technology, lighting, no less than scenography, is informed by shifting perceptions of the everyday world. The way in which we light the stage is indicative of how we see light in our daily lives. The theoretical and aesthetic approaches to stage lighting developed by Appia were inevitably shaped and controlled by the way in which he and his late-nineteenth-century contemporaries perceived light. Appia’s singular genius lay in his ability to take the new technology, electric lighting, and use it as the primary tool of his new artistic vision that would transform the stage for the next century. Ironically, while the technology of producing light has not changed significantly in the past one hundred years, the way in which we see has altered radically. We no longer see the world as Appia saw it. Consequently, we can no longer light the stage in the way that he did.

The new technology allowed the stage designer to replicate the diffuse light (and shadows) and angles of sunlight, to suggest the effects created by man-made light fixtures and to generate well-controlled special effects. Even in the nontheatrical world of everyday life, the new electric lighting attempted to duplicate the angles and intensity of the sun. In such an environment, something like footlights became anathema; they were seen as an unnatural form of lighting that defied logic and offended the sensibilities. There was no equivalent of footlights in the natural world, hence they became an anachronism on the electrified stage. Semiotically, they became unreadable; they could not be understood as a sign for any form of recognizable extratheatrical lighting—and thus they shattered the fragile illusionism of the stage and disrupted what Appia called “organic unity.” The fundamental basis of Appia’s lighting reform emerged from an attempt to create a scenographic vocabulary that matched, at least on an emblematic level, the perceived structures of the natural order. In his “Comments on the Staging of The Ring of the Nibelungs” (1891–92) Appia stated:

the current use of fixed footlights must be irrevocably done away with and replaced by portable strip lights completely subordinated to lighting from above with the single aim of creating artificially the diffused light of day. . . . For exterior settings, the light will always come from above save for some few exceptions; the height of the characters is taken as the maximum angle and all comes from the same direction. For the interior setting the light will enter very obviously through the openings (never hori-
the nearby city of San Diego was contemplating a new street lighting system whose glow would virtually obliterate Mt. Wilson's view of the night sky.

Our ancestors, as recently as two or three generations ago, were familiar with the night sky as we are with, say, television; they knew the phases and movements of the planets, stars, and moon and could tell the time, the seasons, and navigate by these elements. How many people today can identify constellations, differentiate between planets and stars, or identify the seasons by the location of these bodies? Humankind seems to have an intrinsic need not merely to illuminate the darkness but to eliminate it. "Lighten our darkness; we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night," reads an evening prayer from the Book of Common Prayer. Similarly, this plaintive cry from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "Lead me from the unreal to the real! / Lead me from the darkness to the light! / Lead me from death to immortality!" Poet Dylan Thomas may have "rage[d] against the dying of the light," but all we need do is flip a switch. However, in the process of eradicating night we have lost yet another link with the natural rhythms of the cosmos; we have severed our connection with the natural darkness that, by rights, should occupy some half our lives. 2

What have these observations to do with stage lighting? The art of lighting began as an attempt to replicate the natural light of the sun that illuminated performances from ancient times through the Renaissance. It began as an attempt to brighten the gloomy interiors of Renaissance theaters and to enhance the spectacle of nighttime festivals at court. But if light is the antithesis of darkness, if lighting design is the transformation of invisibility into magical visibility, then how does one learn to light the stage in a world in which darkness does not exist? Without darkness we cannot see the light.

In Appia's time, so-called artificial light (what an odd term!) was still something special. Its very existence was reason enough to notice it. In theaters that we would consider pits of darkness—even Appia commented that "our stage is normally a dim and undefined space"—observers commented on the brightness, the effects, the "reality" of artificial light. When Richard D'Oyly-Cart first introduced electric light in the auditorium of London's Savoy Theatre in October 1881, a newspaper story related that "as if by the wave of a fairy's wand the theatre immediately became filled with a soft, soothing light, clearer and far more graceful than gas. . . . [The audience] gave a cheer." 3 A few months later, when D'Oyly-Cart introduced electric light to the stage itself, the Times noted that "the effect was pictorially superior to gas, the colours of the dresses . . . appearing as true and distinct as by daylight." 4

But even in the everyday world it was not all that long ago that nighttime lighting was sufficiently unique that it could attract spectators the way moths are attracted to flames. As recently as the 1960s new stores announced their openings and drew in customers by mimicking Hollywood premieres: searchlights swept the skies, and the curious came from miles around to find the source of the light and to see what certainly must be a special event, for why else would such light be used? Today, in a world saturated in a brilliant luminescence, such effects would barely be visible amid the competing stimuli, and even if they were noticed, they would hardly pass the threshold of curiosity.

We now live in a world in which the most banal enterprises employ flashing, moving, dancing lights in a profusion of colors, a world in which laser light shows no longer raise an eyebrow, a world in which stasis is anathema and the senses are no longer stimulated but assaulted. The once miraculous fantasy of lights that made up such attractions as Times Square, Piccadilly Circus, and Coney Island, the sort of display that, as the Italian futurists demonstrated, could inspire an avant-garde movement, is now unremarkable. "Fire + fire + light against moonlight and against old firmaments war every night," proclaimed Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, in his futurist manifesto, "The Variety Theatre."

great cities to blaze with electric signs . . . electric signs dim die under a dark stiff hand come to life again continue to stretch out in the night the human day's activity courage + folly never to die or cease or sleep electric signs = formation and disaggregation of mineral and vegetable center of the earth . . . transformation of the streets into splendid corridors to guide push logic necessity the crowd toward trepidation + laughter = music hall uproar . . . tubes of mercury red red red blue violet huge letter-eels of gold purple diamond fire Futurist defiance to the weepy night the stars defeat warmth enthusiasm faith conviction will power penetration of an electric sign into the house across the street. 5

The energy and technology that Marinetti exalted in 1913 now exists in rock concerts, music videos, video arcades, and even shopping malls, in the frenetic rhythms of television commercials, and the seductive cadences of Hollywood's techno-ballets of slaughter and mayhem. For the generations raised on the flickering light-box known as television, for a generation attuned to the pulsating assault of discs and MTV and anesthetized by the frantic pace of image-driven films, how are the comparatively tame images of a stage play or even a musical possibly to be comprehended? Although
even a simple, single-set drama may now employ several hundred lighting instruments and modulate through dozens of computer-controlled light cues, the visual language hardly registers on the benumbed retinas of contemporary audiences. The relatively static and monochromatic lighting typical of most stage dramas is virtually below the threshold of visibility.

In a 1912 essay Appia seemed to warn of this danger. “First of all,” he explained, “we shall learn that, merely ‘to make visible,’ is not to light in this sense at all, and that, on the contrary, in order to be creative or plastic, light must be an atmosphere, a luminous atmosphere.” A few years later he proposed that “like the actor, light must become active.”

Though Appia’s scenography was in part a response to the pictorial realism and naturalism of the nineteenth century, the Appian approach and the naturalistic aesthetic were related through much of the twentieth century. In order to sculpt space—that is, create the illusion of three-dimensional space within the cubic framework of the proscenium stage—light had to obey the rules of nature. As his comments on the Ring suggest, source and directionality still prevailed within the semiabstract sphere of Appian lightspace. In general, light on the stage, whether in a naturalistic context or in an abstract setting, created the illusion of light from a knowable source that obeyed the rules not only of physics but of ordinary human observation.

But ordinary observation today reveals a different order. In a city of skyscrapers, for instance, where does light come from? Light is reflected at bizarre angles off glass-skinned buildings. City dwellers may find themselves in shadow or darkness at midday because natural light is blocked by man-made structures, while at night they may be bathed in light as bright as that from the sun. From discos, to airport walkways, to shopping malls, to hotel atriums and chic restaurants, to the grotesquely theatrical world of Las Vegas nightclubs and casinos, lighting emanates from “unnatural” angles, from hidden or invisible sources, and, increasingly, from beneath the floor. Moreover, it moves. Thus, architects and illuminating engineers in our culture have obliterated any true sense of darkness and our ability to comprehend it, while simultaneously eliminating logical and knowable motivation from lighting. And yet this approach to light is so commonplace in our society that we seldom pay any heed. It is significant, I think, that the leading design textbook in the United States begins its section on lighting with this sentence: “While each one of us reacts to our environment in a unique manner, it is generally true that we take light and lighting for granted” (emphasis added). Light is no longer associated with day nor with experiential sources.

Interestingly, the more—or—less neutral space of platforms, steps, black drapes, and open stage inspired by Appia as the perfect environment for his “organic unity” has become the source of a disjunctive, discordant, nonharmonious system of light. In this Appian stage space that was exploited by expressionism and embraced by modern dance—a stage space that became emblematic of twentieth-century theatrical performance—light has become the most visible, most dynamic, and most compelling force; it even, on occasion, surpasses the performer. Largely because of modern dance, light has drifted from its moorings, as it were. It is no longer tied to motivational sources but has taken on a physical force, making it a performer within the dance. Light is a force that draws dancers toward it; it is a force that pushes dancers across a stage; a wall of light may act as resistance against a dancer or create a sort of curtain through which the audience must struggle to see.

Almost any production nowadays, whether dance, opera, musical theater, or drama, reveals lighting design practices that would have been incomprehensible only a few years ago. Instead of the wash of light that permeated the stage (with appropriate accents and highlights), we now encounter high-contrast lighting and selected visibility. A performer may be illuminated in the midst of total or partial darkness; details are selected out and highlighted while all else is concealed. Backlight, no longer purely functional, has now become an end in itself, a visible element of the stage picture. Building upon the innovations of Josef Svoboda, smoke or mist is often employed so that very long, narrow, diagonal shafts of backlight may be seen. We have what the late lighting designer Richard Nelson described as shafts of light “blazing against darkness.”

We are in a world of postmodern lighting. Just as postmodern scenography derives from an amalgam of elements drawn from historical sources, theatrical images, and the kaleidoscopic content of the everyday world presented in a panhistorical, omnisticlyptic pastiche, postmodern lighting is a veritable cauldron of lighting techniques placed in the service of a production. From the time of Appia until the near present, light was the subtle thread that guided us through the narrative structure or unified discourse of the theatrical work of art; the lighting designer in a sense was our Virgil, guiding us through the darkness. But in postmodern design, light on the stage obeys the logic of light in urban spaces, of television and cinema, of rock concerts. Light may emphasize juxtaposition and contrast rather than organic unity. Light, in fact, is no longer about unity but about transition. How we get from one place or moment to the next has become more important than what it looks like when we are there.
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We are, historically, in a period of political and social transition, and lighting design inevitably reflects that sense of instability. It is a light that ebbs and flows, startling and surprising. What we don’t see becomes as important as what we do see.

When limelight and the electric arc lamp were introduced, many observers were dismayed by the effects. The critics objected not to the instruments per se, but to the disruption caused by the harsh white light in the midst of the yellow effulgence of the gas-lit stage. A Swedish critic complained about the lighting effects in an 1897 production of Strindberg’s Master Olaf: “the red light in the first tableau, the glaring sunshine after the death of the mother. Here a stagey element was introduced, which seemed brutal, just because it seemed to have so little to do with the rest.” This discordant image, so disruptive to fin de siècle sensibilities, might be described by postmodernists as “rupture” or “disjuncture,” but this unintentional discontinuity, caused by the use of a still-imperfect technology with no understanding that its aesthetic rules differed from those of gas, has become an intentional aesthetic in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century lighting design.

Compared to the “primitive” technology of one hundred years ago, light on the stage today utilizes computers, electronics, and more efficient lamps. But the method of production would not be unrecognizable to Appia or David Belasco. The very aesthetics (or more properly, lack of aesthetics) of the nineteenth century, however, are now being replicated and exploited in a visually disjunctive manner to create a vision that more accurately reflects the perception of our world. The unmotivated, the inorganic, and the disunified that were unintentional hallmarks of nineteenth-century lighting are now the aesthetic realities of light in the contemporary world.

Notes

2. A recent article in the New York Times (“City Lights Alter Rhythm of Life on Long Island Sound,” July 29, 2003) noted that the significant amount of light along the Long Island Sound from the northeast megalopolis was disrupting the feeding and mating habits and life cycles of many forms of marine life.
5. The Times, December 29, 1881, quoted in Rees, Theatre Lighting.