The Play of Light: Rethinking mood lighting in performance

Emerging from a context of expanded scenography, this article examines the role of light in creating and shaping atmospheres in performance. This capacity of light is significant in relation to the emerging body of research on the nature and composition of atmospheres in and beyond performance. Within theatre and performance studies, however, light’s atmospheric potential has rarely been considered in depth, and colloquially light is often described as ‘atmospheric’ as a catch-all term that precludes the complexity at stake in its generation of atmosphere, or its provocation of mood. This paper, then, offers a critical rehabilitation of the term ‘atmospheric light’, by examining the sensual as well as visual ways in which light generates shifting atmospheres in Enda Walsh’s *Ballyturk* (2014). In thinking through this particular example, this article employs scenographic thinking to address the complex multi-modal operation of atmospheric light in performance. In so doing, I aim to show the dramaturgical and ontological significance of atmospheres constructed by and through light in performance, and to point to the material and critical importance of scenographically constructed atmospheres in theatre practice.

Keywords: atmosphere; scenography; lighting design; dramaturgy; Enda Walsh

# Introduction

Light has long been recognised as a significant theatrical material, so much so that aspects of its terminology have seeped into general parlance; to ‘steal the spotlight’ or to have one’s moment ‘in the limelight’, for example, are commonly used phrases that link ideas of performance, attention, and artificial, theatrical light. In spite of this ubiquity, light has, until recently (see, e.g., Crisafulli [2013], Palmer [2013, 2018]), received limited critical attention within the wider discipline of theatre and performance studies. Indeed, there is considerably greater depth and complexity to the ways in which the phenomenon of light in the theatre navigates concepts like performance, attention, and artificiality than is widely understood. Analysis of the mercurial and polysemic phenomenon of light in the theatre has much to offer wider understandings of performance, dramaturgy, and audience experience. Light is at once the means of visual perception — that which makes it physiologically possible to see — and an object of perception in its own right; something that itself is seen and, importantly, felt. Thus, it is both phenomenon and material, both affective and manifest in the ecologies of live performance. It can operate diegetically, within internal dramatic logic, or non-diegetically, as commentary on the action. Furthermore, within the already liminal context of performance, light is subject to continual shift and change, demonstrating the instability and temporality of performance. In selecting what can be seen and affecting how an object, body, or space appears, light is a significant agent of mediation in performance. Professional theatre practice has adopted a number of conventions in regard to this. Shifts in light, for example, are frequently used to signal changes in space and time, and audiences have learned to read the widely used trope of the blackout as theatrical punctuation or as a pause or gap in time (Rayner 2006, 158; Welton 2013, 10; Moran 2017, 11). All performance engages in some way with light – whether through deliberate lighting design, or in more spontaneous ways such as an outdoor performance that happens to use conditions of natural or street lighting. The negation of light in performances that take place in near or total darkness also amounts to a use of light, in that they are reliant on the manipulation of light and dark. In both its presence and its absence, then, light forms an integral part of the means of experience. As Scott Palmer argues, light is ‘a material that has the ability to make a profound impact on audiences – it is not simply an illuminant but has meaning in and of itself’ (2018, 48). The question of what meaning(s) light may have in and of itself is a slippery one, dependent on context, cultural associations, and the multiple subjective dimensions of ephemeral phenomena.

One significant aspect of this complex area is the role of light in the construction and composition of theatrical atmospheres. While the atmospheric properties of light are widely acknowledged, this is an area that warrants substantial further analysis as to the dramaturgical and ontological significance of atmospheres constructed by and through light in performance. In relation to theatre and performance, ‘atmosphere’ is a term much used and abused, especially in regard to light. In popular criticism, descriptions of performance design in general and lighting design in particular as ‘atmospheric’ abound. Such descriptions often signal a lack of understanding about the precise nature of the contribution of the design, or, as it has been comedically translated by Francesca Peschier in a feature for *Exeunt* about tropes of theatre criticism, as being reviewer code for ‘I know I was meant to feel something but I was also thinking about chips’ (*Exeunt*, September 17, 2018). As critic Mark Fisher observes, the term ‘atmospheric’ is meaningless if you cannot articulate what *kind* of atmosphere is produced (2015, 179, emphasis added). More specifically, the capacity of light to create or support atmosphere is one of its most commonly assumed features in performance. Nick Moran, for instance, observes the established practice of using ‘sound to evoke “place” while light focuses on “atmosphere” and guiding audience focus’ (2019, 101). Thus, the sense that light generates an atmosphere is both a quality of the medium, and a convention developed through practice. Yet, the explication of light’s role in producing atmosphere is often understood in rather shallow terms, focussed around enhancing the mood already presented and defined in a performance text.

This article, then, aims to examine the role that light plays in the production of theatrical atmospheres, using the particular example of *Ballyturk* (2014), written and directed by Enda Walsh, produced by Landmark Productions and Galway International Arts Festival. As both a playwright and director, Walsh is increasingly recognised as an artist who plays with theatrical form. Jesse Weaver notes that, while Walsh’s early plays emphasised body and voice and were largely devoid of stage directions, space has become ‘a prime element of his dramaturgy’ (2017, 25) in his more recent work, and *Ballyturk* certainly falls within this category. For Clare Wallace, Walsh’s theatre ‘has tended towards an increasingly self-conscious exploration of the space and texture of performance that blends the metatheatrical with the metaphysical’ (2017, 36). Michelle Paull observes that Walsh’s plays emerge from image and atmosphere (2017, 185), however the material dynamics of the shifting images and atmospheres produced in Walsh’s theatre remain underexamined. Reflecting on responses to the production of *Ballyturk* discussed here, Wallace writes that, consistently, ‘viewers and reviewers remarked upon two aspects of the show: first the force and energy of the acting, and second, its general inscrutability’ (2017, 45). I mean to show that unpicking the action of the light within the performance provides a productive lens through which to apprehend the work.

# Mood lighting, atmosphere and feeling

As has been acknowledged elsewhere (Palmer, 2018, 49; Moran, 2017, 22; Bergman, 1977, 11), light has tended to receive limited critical and scholarly attention within theatre and performance studies. The paucity of research on light has meant that, until relatively recently, publications on the subject have been dominated by technical handbooks which, in aiming to teach their readers how to light for the stage, implicitly follow twentieth-century theatrical conventions through which ‘it was commonly accepted that good theatre lighting was that which did not draw attention to itself’ (Palmer, 2018, 48). This has perpetuated a notably shallow conception of atmospheric uses of light, particularly within anglophone theatrical traditions. Linda Essig, for example, states,

the atmosphere created by the lighting compositions may be designed to work in parallel or in contrast to the emotions of the actors. Light cannot “act” the way a human being can, but lighting can act upon an environment and be used to create an atmosphere that can be, for example, mysterious, cheerful, or romantic. It is up to the actors then to play with or against that visual atmosphere to heighten the impact of the overall emotional mood of the scene (2005, 25).

While the suggestion that light can work ‘in parallel or in contrast to’ the work of the actors speaks to scenographically rich possibilities of dialogue between actors’ bodies and light, this is conceived in a strictly hierarchical relationship in which light supports the mood generated by an actor’s emotional labour. Essig’s view here is representative of a wide range of lighting textbooks that put forward what we might think of as a weak conception of atmospheric uses of light, in which ‘atmospheric’ comes to mean illustrative, or supportive of meaning produced elsewhere (see, for example, R. H. Palmer, 1996, 25). In response to this position, contemporary exegeses of the capabilities of light in performance have tended to state the significance of light as going beyond merely producing atmospheres (see, for example, Abulafia [2016] and Graham [2016]). While such work demonstrates that the complexity at play in performance lighting certainly exceeds a shallow comprehension of ‘atmospheric’, this tendency to leverage the significance of performance light *against* the idea of atmosphere or mood obscures the richness at play in light’s role in the generation of atmosphere in and through performance.

The weak conception of light’s atmospheric capacities that has, until recently, been dominant in subject literature, risks a lack of terminological specificity in which atmosphere, emotion, and mood are often conflated in discussions of light in scholarly and popular sources. Pilbrow, for instance, argues that light can both convey and create atmosphere (1997, 128) but holds the creation of mood as one of the core objectives of lighting design, noting light’s powerful ability ‘to impact on our emotions’ (9). For Yaron Abulafia, this formula is reversed as he positions ‘atmosphere or emotion’ as one of the core modes in which light operates in performance, through which both the perception and the mood of the spectators can be affected (2016, 110). Richard Palmer identifies mood as one of the principal functions of stage lighting (1994, 7), but subsequently draws mood and atmosphere together as ‘unavoidable features of light’ which must not be allowed to ‘override’ the other functions of light in performance (ibid, 30). The slippages between atmosphere and mood in these examples perhaps relate to the particular sensual and emotive operation of the theatre where ‘seemingly individual feelings or emotions are often difficult to separate from the overall ‘mood’ or ‘atmosphere’ in which the performance develops’ (Welton, 2011, 18). It is also the case that such slippages relate to historically shallow understandings of light as both a phenomenon and a material of the theatre. Lighting handbooks and manuals, in aiming to teach and thus reproduce accepted patterns of lighting choices for the stage, have tended to assume a rather direct line between production and reception. Such assumptions have been troubled by contemporary research that points to the complexity of the audience experience and the multiple ways in which performance materials can act on spectators (see, for example, McKinney [2013], Schneider [2015], Bleeker [2017]), but these insights have rarely been applied directly to light. Meanwhile, the advent of the ‘scenographic turn’ (Collins and Aronson, 2015), has brought with it new ways of thinking about the nature of light in performance, and, indeed, about the ways in which meaning is composed in performance through scenographic materials such as light. The recent expansion of research about the active operation of light and dark in performance (as in, for example, Baugh [2013]; Crisafulli [2013]; Palmer [2013, 2015, 2018]; Gröndahl [2014]; Abulafia [2016]; Graham [2018]; Alston and Welton [2017]; Moran [2017]) presents a range of compelling frameworks through which light can be understood as a constructive and consequential material in performance. Drawing on the foundations laid by this expanding field of research, I argue that light’s role in the construction of theatrical atmospheres is still more complex than has been accounted for elsewhere. Thus, theatre, as DiBenedetto points out, ‘uses light to create mood, to fill in the details of the world that is being represented’ (2010, 47) but attending to the ways in which this happens speaks to the generative properties of light in performance, as well as the myriad ways that atmospheres emerge through the confluence of spaces, objects, and subjects. Seeking to address this complexity, the remainder of this article will focus specifically on ways in which light works to generate atmospheres in performance, acknowledging that further, interrelated, questions about the role of light in relation to mood and emotion remain.

Atmospheres are enormously significant in the construction of performance, and in the experience of performance for audiences and artists alike. Edensor and Sumartojo observe that atmospheres are phenomena that blur the boundaries between affects, sensations, materialities, emotions, and meanings which are all ‘enrolled within the force-field of an atmosphere’ (2015, 253). Thus, as Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, ‘performative space also always creates an atmospheric space’ (2008, 114). This atmospheric space is, necessarily, always in flux because of the nature of performance as event. As such, Rachel Hann has persuasively argued that scenography, as ‘a navigation of the immaterial affects of sound and light, as well as the subjectivities of tempo and objective dimensions of physical matter’ can be understood as affective atmospheres (2019: 21). Yet, as Yaron Shyldkrot points out, though the term ‘atmosphere’ is widely used in relation to theatre and performance, ‘what atmospheres *are* remains rather hazy and the different ways in which they might be generated in and through performance are often left unexplored’ (2019, 148). Shyldkrot goes on to posit specific strategies for the production of atmosphere, using the example of theatrical haze to argue that atmosphere ‘emerges from the interaction between the constellation or assemblage of natural and aesthetic elements in a particular space and time: in a particular “meeting” or interaction’ (2019, 149). This point about the constellation of elements is crucial to the ontology of atmospheres in performance and highlights the importance of attending to the felt, material dynamics of performance, rather than pursuing a fixed or definitive summation of what performance atmospheres are. Martin Welton turns to the medium of air itself in understanding the potency of performance atmospheres, noting that the materiality of performance renders air ‘a tangible thing’ (2018: 81). Following Rancière, he argues that the aesthetic experience of performance atmospheres comprises attunement to one’s experience of situatedness within the environment in which the performance unfolds as well as to the sensory properties of the objects within that space (84). In this way, attentiveness to atmospheres in performance necessitates a material engagement with objects and environments as well as attentiveness to the dynamics of movement through time. This kind of attunement connects in many ways with Heidegger’s understanding that mood ‘comes neither from “without” nor from “within”, but rises from being-in-the-world itself as a mode of that being’ (1996, 128). Mood, in Heidegger’s sense is a tuning, and is essential to ‘the sense we have of being in a significant worldly situation that is not of our own making’ (Ratcliffe, 2013, 160). This tuning, or this negotiation between the ‘within’ and ‘without’ is particularly acute in relation to felt atmospheres generated by light which is both material and immaterial, both seen and felt. Elsewhere, Joanne Zerdy and Marlis Schweitzer have turned a performance studies lens to the material of light, arguing that it produces provocative atmospheres with the power to ‘affect humans and all other beings, entities, and forces that come within its seemingly limitless reach’ (2016, 17). In examining contrasting large-scale immersive public events they draw productively on metaphors of light to argue that it is ‘an animating performer in its own right’ (5).

Much of this work draws fruitfully from research beyond theatre and performance studies; in particular the highly influential work of the phenomenologist Gernot Böhme has been instructive in the development of thinking about atmospheres and aesthetics. Indeed, his work is woven through all of the above thinking about theatrical atmospheres. Böhme, in turn, draws on stage design as a paradigm for the production and generation of atmospheres (2008, 2013). For Böhme, the stage illustrates two avenues through which to explore atmospheres: production and reception, highlighting the dichotomy of atmosphere as an object of study. On the one hand, he argues, atmospheres are entirely subjective, needing to be experienced in terms of ‘one’s own emotional state’ (2013, 2). Yet, simultaneously, atmospheres are something ‘out there’, something ‘quasi-objective’ that can be produced, as is so often the case in the theatre (3). It is in part through the dominance of light and sound design, Böhme argues, that the making of atmospheres becomes clear. This making does not relate to the concrete qualities of things or spaces, but to the kind of *ekstases* of things; the expressive forms of things radiating out into ‘tuned’ spaces (7). Thus, the ‘ecstasies of the thing’ provides a way of thinking of the thing, not as something closed or finite, but something that ‘exerts an external life. It radiates as it were into the environment, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions and suggestions of movement’ (1993, 121). In Böhme’s characterisation of the making of atmospheres, things like light and sound act as generators, ‘making possible the appearance of a phenomenon by establishing conditions’ (2013, 5). Thus, performance design is a paradigm of the aesthetics of atmospheres, revealing that atmospheres can be produced, that they are something quasi-objective, and that they are produced by particular elements, of which light and sound are excellent examples (2017, 3). For Böhme, this means that the theatre provides material through which to conceptualise the ontological indeterminacy of atmospheres as phenomena that are crafted, while requiring a perceiving, or participating, subject for their realisation.

Böhme’s conception of performance design, however, remains largely bound to an idea of stage design as illustrative or decorative, arguing that its task is ‘to provide the atmospheric *background* to the action, to attune the spectators to the theatrical performance and to provide the actors with a sounding board for what they present’ (2013, 3, emphasis added). As such, his engagement with stage design as a paradigm for the exploration of atmospheres remains largely conceptual rather than rooted in the material practices of the theatre, or in the expanding academic literature on the topic. Contemporary research on scenography indicates that much more is at stake in the ‘methods through which a stage is wrought and rendered spatially and materially attentive’ (Hann 2019, 84). That scenography is ‘a way of doing, being and thinking’ (McKinney and Palmer 2017, 16) and that ‘the experiential and embodied nature of scenographic experience and the dynamic interactions of bodies, environments and materials that expanded scenography aims to generate’ reveals scenography as ‘a performative act of encounter’ (8). Thus, the expanded remit of scenographic thinking serves as a vehicle to extend Böhme’s paradigm; beyond and in addition to the ways in which performance design practices illustrate that atmospheres can be produced or designed, the active and affective operation of scenographic materials in performance offers a mode of thinking with and through atmospheres in greater depth.

# In performance, *Ballyturk*

In order to think through the emergence and experience of atmospheres in performance, particularly in relation to the ephemeral material of light, I turn now to Enda Walsh’s *Ballyturk,* (2014).[[1]](#footnote-1) This production makes a compelling case study for the exploration of light’s role in the construction of theatrical atmospheres for three principal reasons. First, the form of *Ballyturk,* employing, as it does, a proscenium stage, can both affirm Böhme’s argument about the ‘stage set’ as a paradigm for the construction of atmosphere (2013) and argue for a much deeper understanding of the formative role of scenography in the construction of theatrical atmospheres. Second, its ‘vibrant and visceral theatricality’ (Paull 2015, 185) speaks to a sense of play with theatrical form, and such play with form makes this performance an excellent means of examining the material theatrical language through which light sculpts atmospheres. Third, this is a play in which atmospheres are profoundly important to the dramaturgy, through scenes that are, as Walsh puts it, continually ‘thrown from one atmosphere to another’ (2014, viii).[[2]](#footnote-2) Using scenographic thinking and attentiveness to the operation of atmospheres in relation to this example thus builds on this work to extend understandings of the depth of practice at play in lighting for the theatre.

While the work of Shyldkrot, Welton, Zerdy and Schweitzer referenced earlier all draws on performance practices beyond traditional theatre settings, or free of the strictures of logo-centric dramatic form, there remains much to be said about the atmospheric operation of light within proscenium-framed theatre practice. Moving fluidly between diegetic and non-diegetic states, the light in *Ballyturk* includes a range of subtle tonal changes as well as bold use of theatrical lighting tropes, and changes in light that are alternately embedded within the action and operate as a kind of commentary on that action. Accordingly, this production affords a clear view of the dramaturgical complexity involved in the lighting of a dramatic play.

The action in *Ballyturk* centres on two, unnamed, characters – in the script they are known only as ‘1’ and ‘2’ and are, in this production, both men. As in many of Walsh’s plays, these characters are bound by ritual and storytelling, and they inhabit a world constructed around the action of telling stories. The physical space that they inhabit – in a set designed by Jamie Vartan – is arranged to facilitate their storytelling. The expansive, grubby room in which they apparently live is enclosed by high walls, covered in indistinct stains and peeling wallpaper. Above, there are large (seemingly) concrete beams, bridged by metal bars, with light streaming in from above this space, leaving dark shadows across the walls and floor. Within this single room dwelling, the characters fill their time with elaborate routines, dressing and bathing to music, and sleeping between alarms on a fold-down bed. The central space in this room is kept clear, it transpires, to facilitate their rituals of telling highly physicalised stories to each other.

First prompted by the chiming of a cuckoo clock, the manic action of their storytelling sees the men throw back a curtain covering the back wall to reveal a neon sign spelling ‘Ballyturk’ and a cluster of charcoal drawings depicting the people of this imagined town. Three characters are selected from this host of hand-drawn faces by throwing a dart and the storytelling begins with the pull of a lever that triggers a dramatic shift in the light. The central gesture of the light in this production is encapsulated in this shift from the general light of the room to the sculpted spotlights of ‘Ballyturk’. In the script Walsh specifies that ‘*[t]he world of Ballyturk is told almost like film noir – lights cut through the darkness and catch detailed glimpses of what 1 and 2 are creating in the shadows’* (2014, 235). In performance, Adam Silverman’s lighting mixes sharp shafts of light, visible against the floor and walls of the space with crisp round spotlights picking the actors out at various points on the stage. Accordingly, many of the changes in light in this production involve demonstrable shifts between light and dark. Between these bold changes, there are also a range of more subtle changes; between warmer and colder tones, or gradually varying the brightness of the stage. Much of the analysis here will focus on moments of more dominant change in light, as these exemplify ways in which atmospheric light actively works to generate changes in performance. Such dominant changes in light also make plain the kinds of dramaturgical interventions that lighting design can make in a theatrical performance. Moreover, radical changes from one kind of light to another make light itself both visible and palpable, in a way that troubles ideas that light is in itself, immaterial; that it cannot be felt and that it can only be seen when it hits a surface or when there is some medium in the air (see, for example, Ingold [2005: 97]). I argue instead that it is light’s operation across the senses that makes it so significant in relation to the generation of atmospheres. Most significantly, for the purposes of my argument here, the shifts between the general light of the room and that of the storytelling is clearly embedded within the narrative action; 1 pulls a lever to trigger this change in lighting, thus associating the sharp boxes of light with their conscious engagement with the enactment of the characters and stories of their invented town of ‘Ballyturk’. There are points, however, when this link seems to waver, and the light appears to rebel against the characters’ control or to change without any interaction with the lever. One such point occurs when the story stalls momentarily and the two characters appear to have run out of things to say. The two men stare at each other, slightly breathless from the frenetic activity of the preceding scene, while one of them pulls an empty packet of crisps out of his pocket and begins to fiddle with it. During this stall, the light of the room begins to bleed back in over the sharp shapes of the storytelling light. Until, suddenly, the older man finds a way back to the story: ‘And that’s when it starts’ (Walsh, 2014, 239). As if banished by this stroke of inspiration, the stark light of the room recedes and the stage returns to the isolated spots of the storytelling state. Until, reaching a resolution, the story comes to a close and the light returns to the full stage. In this way it is the light that creates both a clarity of division between the quotidian life of the room and the characters’ ritualised practice of storytelling and, later, a blurring of those boundaries.

# Atmosphere and rupture

In this production of *Ballyturk* there is a clear sense that the small, sharp shapes of light are tethered to the storytelling world, or perhaps to their ritualised *telling* of stories, while the wider light across the whole room is that of their daily routine outside of this narrative escape. The sense of rupture between these two states is made acutely significant in the exchanges between the men; the appearance early on in the play of a buzzing fly – an unfamiliar and seemingly miraculous presence in the eyes of the younger man (later swatted at and killed by the other) is a kind of thematic catalyst for the increasing calamity in the action. Light, in the sequences described, operates on a number of levels, and works both in support of the dramaturgical structure of the piece and with a generative, agentic force of its own. On one level, the light is working here to accentuate the themes of the play, as seen in the fundamental shifts between the generalised light of the room and the specific light of the storytelling action. Creating an atmosphere, that works in service of the text is, as I have already mentioned, often included as a core principle of lighting for theatre (R.H. Palmer, 1994, 37; Pilbrow, 1997, 5). This is not to say, however, that this is the *only* way in which the light is operating here, nor that it is bound by the kind of hierarchy suggested in such accounts.

Rather than merely strengthening the themes of the text, the light here is one of a number of elements working to create the atmospheres in which the many possible meanings of the play emerge. Speaking about the play, Walsh has stated that it should ‘bypass the intellect and go straight to the bones’ (in Lynch, 2017 n.p.) and the lighting is crucial to this visceral impact, because of how immediately it works to shift the atmospheres of the performance. It is interesting to ask, too, about the functioning of atmosphere in the context of a proscenium theatre. Dan Rebellato has persuasively argued against the assumption that representational theatre is illusionistic, maintaining instead that what happens in dramatic theatre is as complex and as interesting as in more radical forms of performance practice (2009). His argument centres around practices of spectatorship and the kinds of imaginative and metaphorical seeing that audiences engage in when attending to a performance. The same is true of performance atmospheres; while there is a clear divide between the shifting light that surrounds the actors and the darkness in which the audience sit, the implied affective ‘sphere’ must include the audience in order for the feeling of the performance to resonate. As Welton notes, the conventional positioning of spectators sitting in rows in the dark ‘does not rule out considering their acts of looking and listening as practical and acquisitive undertakings, nor the extent to which they might be attuned by the performance to which they attend towards a particular quality or “feeling”’ (2011, 4). For Welton these qualities of feeling are integral to the operation of live performance, for both actors and audience. In this way, the affective ‘sphere’ of an atmosphere in proscenium theatre reaches beyond and through the fourth wall, making it possible to both witness the light happening to the characters, and to be affected by its shifting tones and atmospheres. As Erin Hurley puts it, ‘feeling is what is most consequential about theatre. Feeling draws us into the symbolic universe of the theatrical performance by connecting us emotionally with its characters’ (2010, 9-10). Accordingly, qualities of feeling generated in and through performance are important critical markers in the analysis of live performance. *Ballyturk* is a performance in which multiple elements are working in concert to create atmospheres and tones, and yet it is also clear that light plays an active and agentive role in the creation of these changing atmospheres. Nevertheless, the subtle dominance of the atmospheric light does produce specific spatial and tonal gestures that operate as discrete forms of expression. Böhme’s sense of atmospheres as, ‘affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of mood’ (1993, 119) hints at ways that atmospheres created through light can operate in a way not reproducible elsewhere. Put in another way, the light brings forth meanings and emotions not otherwise present in the performance.

On another level, the shifting between diegetic and non-diegetic modes of light here demonstrates the fundamental constructed-ness of the performance. This is clear within the fictional world of the play; the first two men build elaborate stories and routines for themselves and live in a world apparently constructed for them. More broadly, all of this emerges through the theatrical construct of *Ballyturk* as a piece of theatre. For example, what I am calling here the ‘storytelling light’ – the focused shafts of light that accompany the ritualised enacting of the ‘Ballyturk’ stories – makes liberal use of sharp, clearly defined spotlights. There is an overt theatricalisation to the use of light here, through the reliance on the stark and sharp spotlights that ‘have become a part of the language of the theatre’ (Jones, 2004, 35). The shifts in light that exceed the established logic of the fictional world use the theatricality of light itself as a bearer of meaning. The shaping of the play through recognisably theatrical interventions of light (and of sound) here highlights the presence of an external eye – a director, or creator – making these scenes for the benefit of an audience. The light, in this way,

behaves like the mind. It drowns in darkness what it wishes to forget and bathes in light what it wishes to recall. Thus the entire stage becomes a universe of the mind, and the individual scenes are not replicas of three-dimensional reality, but visualized stages of thought (Sokel in Palmer, 2013, 127).

The visualised thought here, grants certain traces of sentience to the light within the theatrical frame, becoming a way of tracing the dramaturgical developments of the action. Moreover, as discussed above, thought is not only ‘visualised’ through light, but rendered palpable, apparently impacting on the feelings of the characters, while opening possibilities for affective responses in the audience. While the light clearly manifests as something that is controlled – and controlling – from outside the stage, the operation of light as a kind of temporal and thematic score marking the meanings and character arcs of the play, mean that it appears as a kind of embodied mind. Like Fischer-Lichte’s ‘radical concept of presence’, the light here suggests a ‘transformative and vital energy’ (2008, 99). While Fischer-Lichte argues that objects cannot attain this kind of presence, referring instead to Böhme’s idea of the ‘ecstacy of things’ (100), the operation of light here as a proxy for the theatrical consciousness in which the whole production comes forth seems to lend a kind of agency to light that might be comparable to the idea of the embodied mind Fischer-Lichte views as integral to the radical concept of presence. This behaving like a mind, then, renders light as a kind of actor in the drama as play unfolds through the entangled choreography of light, action, and space. The kind of agency demonstrated by light in these sequences is dramaturgical; ideas of control and coercion present in the text are given an alternative, spatial and sensual presentation through light. We, the audience, know that the characters apprehend changes in light, but the hermeneutic possibilities created in these fluctuations in light extend beyond the characters treating light as a tool. Connecting light to the storytelling through the lever and the rhythm of performance – and the inclusion of the strong signifier of the spotlight – links the fictional world of the characters with the experience of theatrical presentation.

The increasing volatility of the light invites us to encounter, kinaesthetically, the increasing psychological instability of the characters. Or, as one of the characters says ‘everything’s eaten by the now – by what we build, by what we’ve become – all this life where Ballyturk appears out of the darkness and we enter that town as other people shaped from half ideas’ (Walsh, 2014, 269). That the light morphs and changes around the whole space becomes a sensuous metaphor for the fact that the characters feel consumed by their imagined worlds. Returning to Hann’s assertion that scenography involves ‘an affective *conditioning* of stage atmospheres’ (2019, 72), the continual shifting between states of confinement, mundanity, and performance ultimately drives towards this central idea of being consumed by the everyday in the face of mortality. This production of *Ballyturk,* then, demonstrates a dramaturgical weaving together of elements, a kind of theatrical choreography which emerges in and through the performance. Rebecca Schneider, writing about new materialisms in performance, observes the frequency with which the word ‘choreography’ is used in articulating the operations and interactions of materials in performance. In this frame, she argues, choreography implies embodied or materialised thought (2015, 8) and captures the ways in which sense-making processes are distributed across human and non-human in new materialist readings of performance. In the same way, attending to the confluence of materials in live performance it is possible to identify the agentic capacities of particular performance materials, like light, in generating the atmospheric conditions in which the potential meanings of the play emerge.

# Lighting design and storytelling

The navigation, and elision, of divisions between the normal space of the room, and the heightened theatricality of the storytelling state is at the core of *Ballyturk*’s dramaturgy, not only in the performance’s inhabitation of the stage but also in its structure of being ‘thrown from one atmosphere to another’ (Walsh 2014, viii). As Shyldkrot argues, atmospheres ‘are creatures of the moment - we sense them immediately’ (2019, 147) and the radical shift in light between these two principal states serves to throw the stage into these notably different atmospheres. The first plunge towards the storytelling state in which the stage is cast into darkness except for a sharp rectangle of light around 2 in the centre of the stage invites a visceral, proprioceptive response as the light not only changes in tone but also closes in around him. It is also significant here that neither state yields its context fully at first; the dramaturgical invitation of the play asks the audience to feel the differences in these moments before completely understanding them. Thus, the ‘general inscrutability’ noted by Wallace (2017, 45) is perhaps an invitation for meaning to build cumulatively, for the audience to, as Lehmann notes ‘store sensory impressions’ through the process of attending to the actionv(2006, 87). This is evident from the very opening moment of the play, which begins with a single spotlight and not only in the middle of a story but in the middle of a sentence ‘….and dawn shining now’ (Walsh 2014, 221). Ominously, mentions of violence recur throughout the characters’ stories with a palpable, if initially somewhat indecipherable, sense of danger manifested through the stark shafts of light and murky shadowy recesses of the stage during those moments. It is not until much later in the action that these thematic threads of entrapment, violence, and foreboding are brought together but the light invokes kinaesthetic responses that prepare the audience for later revelations through palpable atmospheric shifts.

Given the thematic importance of storytelling in the play, the link between enacted story and shifting light is vital in understanding the position of light within the world of the play.[[3]](#footnote-3) The two distinct ‘worlds’ created through light in this play – the light of the room and the light of the storytelling – each provoke immediate shifts in atmosphere. The light of the room broadly covers the full stage but features some subtle shifts in colour tone and in the line of shadows on the floors and walls. The storytelling light, by contrast, is defined by sharp distinct pools of light, surrounded by darkness; first the corridor apparently controlled by the lever, and then the additional spots and shafts of light that appear to meet the cast of invented characters as they are embodied onstage. The lever indicates a level of control that the characters exert over the lighting, that they have incorporated this use of light into their rituals of impersonation. This storytelling light also responds to their changing positions on the stage as the story progresses, a feature that becomes even more striking in later sequences. Also established in this scene is the urgency with which the characters recount and enact the stories of their invented world. This a core theme in *Ballyturk* but is also a recurring motif throughout Walsh’s work, where characters frequently occupy isolated, hermetic worlds where they are confined both spatially and through their entrapment in stories (see Pilny, 2016, 84 – 85).

The character’s diegetic use of light within their rituals of storytelling recalls research in human geography that points to the importance of social and cultural practices of light in everyday life. Bille and Sørensen posit what they call an ‘anthropology of luminosity’ to articulate the ways in which light can manifest social relationships, noting that ‘the materiality of light has the ability to alter human experiences of space, and to define sensations of intimacy and exclusion’ (2007, 174). Going into to more focused detail elsewhere, Bille examines Danish practices of domestic lighting, where, particularly in the winter, soft and localised lighting serves to accentuate both a feeling of security within the home and a sense of social cohesion as residents notice and take comfort in the presence of neighbours heralded by light (2015). As he argues, attending to particular orchestrations of light brings into focus ‘the atmospheres that people are opting for and the dynamics through which they are engaging the world by tying together vision and cultural expectations’ (57). Thus, light continually participates in ‘tincturing the atmospheres that act as the invisible medium for expressing and unfolding social and emotional life’ (57). While Bille’s research participants reported using light to create a sense of cosiness in the home, the characters in *Ballyturk* seem to use light for an altogether different purpose. Or rather, the potency of light revealed in Bille’s research is here utilised as a component of the storytelling rituals of the characters. The agency shown by the characters in using the lever to orchestrate specific pools of light connects their activity to the changing atmospheres created by the light.

In a later episode of storytelling, following a scene in which the younger character’s distress derails another storytelling session, the light of the room begins to fade back in, and the red neon letters of the ‘Ballyturk’ sign stutter into darkness. The mania of this scene raises dramaturgical questions about the nature of the character’s relationship to the light. In the first rendition of the story, the men seem in control of their environment, they trigger the storytelling light through the use of the lever, and it seems to respond to their positions on the stage. In this later iteration of the routine however, there seems a palpable compulsion to keep the story going when the light is shining on them. The younger man is now violently banging his head against the wall, leaving a trail of blood. There is a loud sound, like a crash or a collision, and the stage plunges into darkness. The rear wall tears open and light floods in from the crack in the middle as the upper section of the wall lifts up and the lower portion hinges dramatically to the ground, revealing another character standing on a grassy verge. This third character then steps over the fallen wall, into the room and as they[[4]](#footnote-4) do, a cold, unforgiving light floods into the room, from the front, leaving a harsh shadow along the walls. The harsh glare of this cold light recalls Hans Blumenberg’s argument that light ‘is intrusive; in its abundance, it creates the overwhelming, conspicuous clarity with which the true “comes forth”’ (1993, 31). The stark clarity of the light here, coupled with the oppressive presence of the line of shadow pressing down on the stage creates a deeply uncomfortable atmosphere of destructive revelation in which the characters’ understanding of their world is torn asunder.

Dramatically, this is a pivotal scene, containing the *deus ex machina* appearance of the unexpected third character, and with this appearance the literal – as well as metaphorical – shattering of the confinement of the room. This third character, ominously describing themselves as a ‘collector’ explains that they have come to offer the men a choice: one of them will remain in this room while the other must leave, to die. As they speak, the younger character realises – as if for the first time – that there is a life beyond the walls of their room, and that indistinct scenes that have come to his mind are, in fact, memories and not inventions. This moment also points to an allegorical reading of the play; the third character can be interpreted as an embodiment of death, the stories the men have been harbouring in a means of negating the reality of mortality (see also Pliny [2016, 92-94]). Viewed in this way there is also a certain parallel with Plato’s famous allegory of the cave – the characters learn that their known world is a distortion of the truth. In Plato’s account this incomplete, partial knowledge of the world is represented through shadows on the wall in front of the unfortunate prisoners, shadows deliberately manipulated externally. In *Ballyturk,* the metaphorical shadows are not physical shadows manipulated by their captors but are created by the men themselves. They have constructed the fictional town of ‘Ballyturk’ through words and ritual. Here light does not (as it does in Plato) facilitate the corruption of reality, but forms part of the fabric of their imaginative constructions. Pervasive in this section is an oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere, in part triggered by the mounting distress of the younger man, whose earlier prediction of foreboding seems ever more prescient as the play continues but also, crucially, produced by the light.

# Conclusion

The conclusions to this article stretch in two directions; first analysing the richness at play in the creation of theatrical atmospheres through light, and second, showing that this complexity generates specific affective and dramaturgical forces in performance. In *Ballyturk*, the light works with and in excess of the play text to create both a pervasive mood across the space, and to form a kind of conduit between the characters’ understanding of their world and the audience’s experience. Crucially, the moments of rupture between the two worlds of the storytelling state and the ‘normal’ room demonstrate a clear link between the characters’ conscious production of stories and light, although the position of light within this remains ambiguous. Further to the strong changes of light, there are throughout, a number of more subtle shifts. What appears to be a single state of ‘normal’ in the room is in fact subject to continual tonal shifts, and even within the storytelling state there are a number of changes each time the state recurs. In the room state, especially, the subtle shifts from warmer to colder light condition the appearance of the characters and the room, making the space seem more and then less inviting at crucial points in the action (see also Moran, 2019, 64). In addition to the subtle shifts of colour in the light of *Ballyturk,* the lines of shadow cast through the bars above the stage indicate the presence of an external world beyond the confines of the room. This suggestion seems remote until the rear wall cleaves in two. The direction of the shadows does not progress naturally, following a natural or logical trajectory, but is, rather, unstable and subject to jumps and changes. Additionally, while the shadows initially seem to be cast from a coherent source, and all from one direction, there are points in the play where the shadows cross, illustrating further the constructed nature of the scene. My point in describing these shadows is not to infer the logical details of their potential sources but to illustrate how their shifting presence indicates an active role of light that is both generated and generative. The changing presence of these shadows points to an instability in the stage world, the dramaturgical significance of which increases as the play progresses. Thus, drawing closely on the example of *Ballyturk* has made it possible to unveil the dramaturgical mechanisms of some common tropes of theatrical light, which are tacitly understood by artists and audiences but rarely unpacked critically.

Moreover, in turning a scenographic lens to the analysis of this particular production, this article also contributes to the growing field of analysis of Walsh’s work, arguing that scenographic strategies are embedded in Walsh’s dramaturgy. Recent analyses by Weaver (2018), O’Gorman (2018), Paull (2018) and Wallace (2017) have highlighted the boldness of Walsh’s work with space and theatrical form. This article, however, is the first explicitly scenographic exploration of Walsh’s play with theatrical form. Through this frame and considering atmospheric light as an independent, and inter-dependent, material force within performance it becomes possible to view the action of light as a generative, creative element in the performance of a dramatic play. In this production, light not only enhances the tone suggested by the script or the actors’ delivery, but further contributes simultaneous richness of meaning through its action. In working concurrently with the text, but in a different register, the light here avoids repeating elements presented elsewhere and instead provides a distinct sensual language within the performance. This kind of simultaneity recalls the parataxis of Lehmann’s postdramatic theatre, a principle illustrated by Heiner Goebbels’ rejection of the incessant multiplication of signs in favour of a theatre where all the elements ‘maintain their own forces but act together, and where one does not just rely on the conventional hierarchy of means’ (Lehmann, 2006, 86). The light in this production provides an autonomous contribution to the emergence of meaning, but this is not an autonomy defined through radical difference from the text, but a conversant autonomy in which the light works alongside and in excess of the spoken language.

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1. The production in question premiered in Galway in 2014, later transferring to the Royal National Theatre in London, before being remounted (and partially recast) in 2017 for performances in Dublin’s Abbey Theatre and St Ann’s Warehouse in New York. The play has also been performed more recently at the Tron in Glasgow (2018), in translation in Germany’s Theater Freiburg (2019) and in Japan’s KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theatre and Setagaya Public Theatre (2019) but this article focuses specifically on the Landmark production, directed by Walsh. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Complicities between scenography and dramaturgy have been established elsewhere (Collins and Aronson, 2015, Hann, 2019) and specifically in relation to light (Graham, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interestingly, the motif of characters controlling light on stage in the service of storytelling is also notably evident in an earlier Walsh play, The Walworth Farce (2006), the original production of which was directed by Mikel Murfi, the actor who here plays 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am using a singular ‘they’ here as a gender-neutral pronoun, to allow for the fact that this role was first played by a man – Stephen Rea – but later played by a woman – Olwyn Fouéré. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)