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The unbearable brightness of beams: Light, darkness and obscure images

Yaron Shyldkrot

This chapter explores light and lighting design by means of visual obfuscation. Within the growing study of lighting practices, I examine the transformative role of light by looking at installations and performances which utilize light to confound or obstruct vision and generate experiences of not seeing clearly. Approaching light through its ability to unsettle or destabilize the clarity of what is seen, I turn to both ends of the intensity scale and reflect on the “manipulation of light that is blinding either in its brightness or in its absence” (Öztürk, 2010, p.306). However, rather than contrasting light and darkness or simply suggesting that light can prevent one from seeing, this chapter considers dazzling and dim lighting in tandem, positing that both excessive lighting and lack thereof may pose a challenge to visual certainty. These lighting compositions, as I will argue, can produce altered forms of perception that do not rely on clear identification or recognition. Contesting “an increasingly prevalent tradition of visual clarity” (Donger, 2012, p.14), I propose that not seeing clearly can break the habitual flow of perception, and thus resist ocular biases that tie vision to fixity and certainty. Thwarting fixity, such sensory experiences can reveal a variety of new or alternative interpretations of what is seen (or could be seen). These discernments might upset or even reject common and familiar understandings and thus hold the potential to bring different and novel views of what is perceived to light.

For many sighted people “seeing is believing”, and countless certainties come from being able to see. While traditionally, sight has been crowned “the noblest and most comprehensive of the senses” (Descartes, 2002 [1637], p.116), more recent theses recognize how vision can, in fact, be fickle and unreliable. Not only can one be misled by what they see, but, following Maaik Bleeker, we can identify “institutions of perspective”: long-standing perceptual patterns that demonstrate “how our senses are cultured to perceive certain privileged modes of representation as more natural, real, objective, or convincing than others”, borne out of the discourses that mediate what we think we see (2008, p.13). The presumed definitiveness of sight lends itself to a deceptive impression of clarity, one which solidifies or neutralizes persistent normative and hegemonic perspectives. In response, I seek to trouble the notion that things are as they are because of how they are habitually seen and typically understood. Assuming that these institutions of perspective could be contested, modified or unlearned, this chapter attends to lighting compositions that, rather than clearly lighting *something*, instead aim to frustrate or dispel fixity and identification.

Focusing on moments of intensified “vagueness”, I depart from the examination of how light complements or “supports” stage images through illustrative depictions and representations. Instead, I examine states of extreme brightness and dimness to consider how artists and designers have carefully utilized artificial lighting – employing both glares and glimmers – to profoundly alter the appearance of what is seen, generating perceptual uncertainty. Light, as Katherine Graham notes, “creates the conditions in which we encounter body, space, movement, and gesture, but also continually reconfigures those conditions” (2018b, p.208). Seen in this way, light does not merely “embellish” what one sees but also influences and manipulates the means by which sense is made. Consequently, through obscure images and equivocal appearances, the compositions, artworks and designs discussed below question the reliability of sight to reveal its inconsistency.

That said, the emphasis on not seeing *clearly* is crucial. Notwithstanding the close terminology, when observing compositions in which viewers are “being blinded by the lack of light and being blinded by its excess” (Donger, 2012, p.106), I do not wish to imply that these designs promote experiences of not seeing or of seeing nothing. Notably, despite the challenge to perception such works present, “one’s visual sense remains active even in conditions of total blackout” (Alston and Welton, 2017, p.18). The same applies to glaring light, where sighted viewers can still see, even if it is only brilliance itself. Distancing vision from its routine usage, the compositions discussed below deprive viewers of the ability to see (or perceive) *clearly* – both physically and more metaphorically – encouraging sensory recalibrations and fostering reconfigured perceptions. These experiences are more akin to seeing or making sense differently, as opposed to not seeing at all. I am wary of reinforcing stereotypes and the risk of conflating those experiences with blindness, as the two are not identical. While I concur with Alston and Welton that gloomy, hazy or blazing displays can “invite one to experience the alterity of non-normative visual experiences” (Alston and Welton, 2017, p.25), I am mindful of the ethically problematic promises of a better understating of blindness or the experience of the visually impaired through darkness or dazzling light. Staring at blindness and darkness in disability-led performance, Amelia Cavallo and Maria Oshodi argue that

in darkness no one has “normal” vision, sighted or otherwise. It is because of this that blindness can escape negative stereotypes of incapability, lack and loss, becoming instead an example of how non-normative sensory make-ups can be catalysts for challenging assumed behaviour and identity constructs. (2017, p.173)

Though I share Cavallo and Oshodi’s aim to disrupt “the status quo of sighted dominance in society” (2017, p.172), I recognize that most of the modes of perception examined in this chapter still rely on

varying degrees of seeing or physical acts of sight. Yet, presenting “non-normative visual perspectives as a basis for creative potential and allow[ing] blindness to be conceptually explored on a sociopolitical and artistic level” (Cavallo and Oshodi, 2017, p.189) is still part of a greater ambition to emphasize the multiplicity of perspectives and perceptions that can critically extend to other sense modalities. Cavallo and Oshodi maintain that darkness “can present blindness as an empowered identity while antagonizing and deconstructing normative, hierarchical values of ocularcentrism, and creating a communal need for access and inclusion, regardless of sensory make-up” (2017, p.170). Immediately, the attempt to explore not seeing clearly raises the question of what is clear to whom and from what point of view. However, as I propose, embracing the opportunity to modify the regime of clarity in an attempt to resist fixity and to undermine definite preconceptions, ideologies and privileged modes of looking might equally make room for more diverse ways of sense-making. Pluralizing these opportunities can be read – to borrow from Alston and Welton – as a means of “dealing with the politics of perception that acknowledges how seeing or sensing darkness [...] can be bound up with other modes of looking and sensing”, surpassing those that might be defined as “ableist” (2017, p.25). Put differently, even though vision is centred in this chapter, by emphasising not seeing clearly, I seek to promote the questioning of different modes of perception to unsettle those that have been set as “normative” or prioritized as supposedly leading to certainty. The transformation of clarity, then, is not just a mode of theatrical expression, but a significant intervention in processes of sense-making, one that can actively hamper the risky and ocularcentric coupling of clarity and vision.

Continuing my ambition to resist a single understanding arising from one viewpoint, this chapter moves between perspectives and examines compositions of both light and darkness. I draw on direct experience as a practitioner-researcher, lighting designer and maker of theatre in the dark, situating my practice theoretically and as part of a longer artistic lineage. I begin with a critical framing of “not seeing clearly” followed by an analysis of dazzling and cloudy compositions, discussing examples of work by other artists which are both notable in themselves and which have inspired and informed my practice-research. To further evaluate the implications of “not seeing clearly”, I move on to discuss my own practice-research. Specifically, I draw from insights emerging from the process of making *Overcast* (2017), a piece of performance in the dark, and focus specifically on dim and gloomy compositions as practical strategies for generating moments of visual obfuscation and disrupted clarity. This dual perspective affords a unique position from which to offer insights into the exploration of light and darkness. First, it enables a more nuanced account and argument for not seeing clearly by building on insights arising from studio experimentations and reflexive process in conjunction with analysis of relevant case studies. Second, it allows me to

illuminate and articulate particular aspects of practice and process by addressing more than one approach to practice and moving from light to darkness (and vice versa). Indeed, as Graham asserts, “darkness is a condition of light” and the practice of lighting design “is as much about designing darkness as it is about designing light” (Graham 2016, p.76). So, to advance the conceptualization of light, instead of sustaining a binary or opposition between light and darkness, I take darkness – understood here more broadly, by means of obstructed vision – as my main focus and thus frame a slightly altered interplay between light and darkness: one where varying intensities of light may also condition obfuscation or “darkness”.

Not seeing clearly

The installation *J3RR1* (2018) dazzles viewers. Designed by Italian collective NONE and featured at the *24/7* exhibition in Somerset House in London (2019), it is comprised of two dozen bulbs (surrounded by mirrors) that pulse at varying paces and configurations, creating a harsh stunning effect (see colour plate 18). When visitors face or pass by the large aluminium structure, as it hangs in the gallery space, they are confronted by an ongoing routine of glares, flickers and flashes. While viewers might need light to experience or see the work, it is the same light that makes it difficult to do so. *J3RR1* (subtitled *Programmed Torture*) is a productive example to begin elucidating how light does not simply facilitate the appearance of certain images; rather, it can also impact how these “images” or objects of perception will be encountered. In other words, how things are seen tends to determine how they seem.

Unsettling perception through altered visibility is not a new artistic ambition. Simon Donger, for example, acknowledges that the history of scenography – culminating in the twentieth century with innovations in electric lighting – “is punctuated by devices producing visual disturbances inasmuch as vision is attenuated and representation less than certain” (2012, p.13). Artworks and installations by artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Ann Veronica Janssens, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Carsten Holler, Liz West, James Turrell, Antony Gormley and Olafur Eliasson shape and utilize light and darkness (as well as colour, shadow, and haze) to investigate the depths of perception as well as how the orchestration and interchange between these elements transform clarity and invite a reconsideration of viewers’ senses and environment.

Notably, seeing is not an innocent sensory or physiological activity – it is an act of making sense (Welton, 2017, p.245). Thus, if light mediates what one sees, it is unsurprising that lighting design can impact how something might be grasped or understood. In that sense, light and sight are never

neutral. This is why Hal Foster distinguishes between vision – the physical operation or mechanism of seeing – and visibility – the historical, social and discursive techniques, practices and determinations in which vision takes place (1988, ix). Akin to Bleeker’s institutions of perspective noted above, the supposed priority of the brightest point or predication of focus exemplifies how viewers might attempt to “make sense” of NONE’s installation – even if it is physically demanding to do so. Yet these modes of looking also highlight an underlying and unnoticed perceptual hierarchy formed in and through visibility. Assigning value and judgement to objects of perception, visibility casts certain figures as more worthy of one’s attention, more credible, truthful or significant. Examining visibility, then, not only exposes how certain images appear or are presented to viewers, it also defies “the popular assumption that visual perception is a politically neutral, merely biological element of human experience” (Johnson, 2012, p.12). Foster proposes the notion of a “scopic regime” to account for the complex interrelation between vision and visibility in a given time, place or culture where “many social visualities” or manifestations of visual experiences turn into “one essential vision” (1988, ix). Moreover, as Dominic Johnson explains, by “disguising the social fact of visibility, scopic regimes naturalise the fiction of politically neutral vision, ordering contingent ways of seeing in an artificial hierarchy of visual styles” (2012, p.25). The origination of perspective in the fifteenth century, for instance, can be seen as an example for such “ordering”, constructing modes of looking that later became normalized and naturalized (Johnson, 2012, p.25). In a similar vein, in her critique of traditional divisions between sight and hearing, Lynne Kendrick alludes to “the enduring visual bias that has rendered sight the dominant sense” along with “the residual prejudice that assumes the world is reproduced for the eye” (2017, p.119). Kendrick clarifies that ocularcentrism – a perceptual disposition that prioritizes the visual – “does not mean that the eye itself is dominant; rather swathes of historical and political discourses have made recourse to vision, cleaving apart the senses and forming a hierarchy of perceptual engagement” (2017, p.119). It is these discourses, ideologies and powers that establish and influence that (and what) visual faculties are considered important, determining what eyes should focus on.

Central to these scopic regimes is the promotion of fixity, distinct classification and identification, which results in different ocular (as well as racial, gendered, ableist, human-exceptionalist) biases propagated through the assumption that things (human or other-than-human) are as they are because of how they appear or are apprehended through vision. Crucially, Bleeker views the theatrical apparatus as a critical “vision machine” (2008, p.60), recognizing theatre’s capacity to produce “visions”, understood here as faculties of sight, imaginations and apparitions. Such a view is useful for my exploration of how *J3RR1* and other lighting compositions considered here disrupt the habitual flow of perception and tease or defy certain visual inclinations by instantiating experiences

of not seeing clearly. Whether subtle or overwhelming, glaring or discreet, these compositions can be seen as “a devastating critique of routine vision” (Bal, 2013, p.136), undermining dominant modes of looking by drawing attention to the process of perception itself. By producing obscure images, these works utilize light to unsettle the belief that objects of perception are knowable and determinate because of how they are normally seen or understood physically and therefore conceptually.

Not seeing clearly does not necessarily imply the elimination or rejection of clarity in its entirety. Rather, it denotes a perceptual stance where clarity is deferred or hindered. It is a challenge to the anticipated accuracy, fixity or decidedness of sight that may occur in moments where what is seen is/becomes ambiguous or not easily decipherable. For instance, the spectres, halos and after-images produced by retina burns caused by the brightness and direction of *J3RR1* impede clear vision. The dazzling installation does not negate vision, but radically transforms percepts by incising intense luminous shapes. Therefore, unlike a solitary state of not seeing, not seeing *clearly* provides a more processual and gradual understanding of perceptual uncertainty manifested through indeterminate and indistinct perceptions and referring to either the objects perceived or the act of perception itself. If clarity holds a strong affinity to brightness and coherence, its rejection might denote intangibility or vagueness and extend to other (not necessarily visual) perceptions and experiences. These might include the perception of space, its limits and the visitor’s location within it; discernment of surface, distance and depth; the form/boundaries of the work and its relation to the visitor’s body. Key to these indeterminate experiences and concrete experiments with “ungraspability” (Bal, 2013, p.8) is that perception becomes undecided – it demands time and questioning as viewers and audiences end up recalibrating what they see and experience, and how. Accordingly, contra to just producing bright images with light, *J3RR1* can be seen as a site for reappraisal and negotiation of different perceptual and sensory modalities, enabling alternative modes of sense-making.

As such, by reconfiguring visibility, not seeing clearly can disrupt hegemonic status quos. If, by fixing certain modes of looking, various ideologies or scopic regimes enhance different ocular biases, and coerce/root notions of otherness and normativity, then not seeing clearly can begin to resist those worldviews that are established through visibility. Seen in generative terms, confronting visual perceptions not only holds the capacity to bring certain objects of sight to the foreground, deeming them more significant or deserving of attention; beyond this, by interrupting the customary course of perception, deference of clarity can unshackle visual dispositions and biases from their expected or anticipated meanings. Encouraging viewers to see differently allows alternative and multiple

interpretations to take shape. So, rather than underscoring lack or loss, as I carry on my discussion of visual obfuscation, I argue for the creative and generative potential imbued in not seeing clearly, conceived as the transformation of clarity fostered through the modulation of habitual patterns of perception.

Hazy vision(s)

As clarity tends to denote brightness, translucency and lucidity, I continue to consider what happens when illumination is pushed to the extreme: how the intensification of light might conversely lead to the attenuation of clarity. Amid the flourishing creative and engagements with light design, artists and makers have increasingly used the striking potential of bright light to generate different effects. Performances such as Pan Pan Theatre's *All That Fall* (2011) (directed by Gavin Quinn with lighting design by Aedin Cosgrove), Christopher Brett Bailey's *This is How We Die* (2014) (lighting design by Sherry Coenen), Lucy Carter's *Hidden* (2016) (specifically *Hidden 3: Light Store*) and Fye and Foul's *Cathedral* (2016) incorporate extreme brightness, shining brilliantly on viewers at different points in the performance. Producing destabilized images and uncomfortable brilliances, these compositions continuously defy the hackneyed "maxim of the lighting industry" which suggests, as Gernot Böhme affirms, that "light sources should be designed to prevent blinding glare" to the maximum extent (2017, p.195). More than idle curiosities or novelty-seeking compositions, the inclusion of glare in performance designs often draws attention to the lanterns or light itself. They do not merely accentuate certain details of the stage image, paint the stage, or set up a general "atmospheric background" (Böhme, 2017, p.30). Rather, by reducing the distinctiveness, sharpness or veracity of what is seen, these designs conjure up alternative encounters with the visual, demonstrating how light can inhibit seeing clearly and entice seeing beyond recognition.

Staring at *J3RR1*, for instance, the large structure illuminates primarily those who face it. As viewers are confronted by an intensified sequence of flashes and glares, the main visual offering is the hues, shapes and halos produced by the light emitted. The prominent distinguishable objects in sight are the machine and bulbs themselves, and deciphering them behind a striking wall of light proves to be rather challenging. Indeed, these excessive degrees of brightness tend to be, as Böhme maintains, "unbearable for human beings" (2017, p.199). However, despite such observation (and the slightly hyperbolic title of this chapter), I do not mean to imply that these compositions are primarily intended to cause discomfort or aggressively assault viewers. Carefully sidestepping their often-negative connotations, I propose that these dazzling lights can also elicit other modes of looking,

puncturing the clarity of vision. As a piece of light art, *J3RR1* does not attempt to light something (object, faces or a background). Instead, following the installation makers, “[i]n front of *J3RR1* we feel heat, energy and the clarity of an order that cannot be disobeyed” (NONE, n.p.). Despite connoting adherence to clarity, it seems that this is an ordering of a different kind; certainly, the intensity of light dominates the image and can hardly be avoided or ignored, even when closing one’s eyes or looking away. Yet, the actual visual faculties produced by *J3RR1* are not necessarily clear, at least in the sense of sharp or easily comprehensible. Being overpowered by such extreme intensity can prompt “a kind of unintentional vision”, hindering the possibility of “objectifying” what is seen (Böhme, 2017, p.196). Put differently, the work can be seen as eliciting a mode of looking which moves beyond fixed visual distinctions or clear identification of what is in sight. Instead, it offers viewers the opportunity to yield to light’s power and reevaluate their “obedience” to orders of vision, as perception breaks free from the rigidity of making sense by seeing clearly.

Moreover, looking at the fierce brightness, light presses against the retina, leaving its trace in the form of an after-image. As Erin Hurley expands, “[h]overing for a moment before fading, belatedly, into obscurity, the apparition burned onto the retina captures the outline of what had previously been lit. Put differently, one ‘sees’ phantoms” (2004, p.207). Much like moving away from looking directly at the blazing sun, these “phantoms” or (after-)images produced are a collection of indeterminate visions that do not set as a clear and decipherable object. Similarly, when *J3RR1* flashes off, or viewers look away, it becomes hard to distinguish whether the gloaming glow is the dimming fixture or an after-image, a figure of the imagination or the edge of vision. These flashing harsh intensities, to borrow from Donger’s explanation, formulate “an in-between experience in perceptual terms”; they suspend visual processing, as “visual content has not yet taken shape as such but still occurs as flickering abstract particles that are remnants of past perception (2012, p.78–79). In other words, *J3RR1* does not simply eliminate seeing but renders visual faculties more abstract, indistinct and fuzzy. The percepts generated by the work seem to resist strict interpretation as clarity and lucidity of vision are obstructed.

Significantly, trying to make sense of abstract(ed) or vague perceptions can open the prospect to think about and embrace what is perceived anew. Vagueness denotes fuzziness, imprecision or indistinctness. Ascribed to instances and perceptions that are uncertain or missing the clarity of definition, when something appears to be vague – or possessing equivocal properties – it is understood as not entirely definite, hazily bordered – physically or conceptually. However, rather than sketching vagueness as a deficiency or something lacking, I approach it through openness. If clarity implies distinct and precise entities perceived through recognition or identification, vagueness

tends towards change and movement. It can be understood as a gesture that “resists categories, boundaries, calculations and identities” (Carney and Miller, 2009, p.35) and, in that sense, vagueness can help to account for the different ways through which destabilized perceptions can reveal the possibility to encounter what is seen – even if it is abstracted or obstructed – in unexpected ways. Reviewing *J3RR1* again, as glare counters the consistency of vision and the eyes adjust, the work invites an encounter with different spectre-like glowing percepts that hover but never set, producing new/other possibilities for interpretation and appraisal.

Extending the intensification of light further, what happens when it transfixes viewers by dominating the entire field of vision? Fascinated with isolating the physical and psychological conditions of vision, mid twentieth-century investigations into sensory deprivation sought to better grasp the total field of perception/vision, also known as Ganzfeld. While several researchers experimented with homogeneous retinal images or stimulation, they often studied impressions obtained in/through total darkness or with closed eyes as opposed to dazzling brightness. For psychologists James J. Gibson and Dickens Waddell, a homogeneous image is “ordinarily obtained only by looking at the cloudless sky, or by being in a wholly dark room or by closing the eyes” (1952, p.263). For the image to be differentiated – in the sense of sharp and clear – there is a need for shifts between relative degrees or regions of light and dark. Thus researchers set out to compare the effects of homogeneous (or undifferentiated) images with that of differentiated ones: “images” constituting a uniform degree of light striking the retina in contrast with those comprised of changes in gradients of luminosity or different regions of light and dark. Given my focus on brightness, I linger here on the former, when viewers were drowned in a “sea of light” (Gibson and Waddell, 1952, p.267). Reviewing their findings, Gibson and Waddell noted participant responses that included: “Like a fog coming up to my eyes”; “A white that you could go into”; “Levels of nothingness”; “Clouds ... very thick ... endless” (1952, p.267). They concluded that the impressions emerging when looking at a homogeneous field of vision “are indefinite, unspecific, and ambiguous” (1952, p.270). Unable to distinguish between the different aspects or properties of visual faculties – through shadow or size – the ability to decipher or construe percepts as “objects” is once again compromised. Participants experiencing “pure vision” reported an extraordinary difficulty to articulate or “express what they saw. [...] After prolonged exposure (ten to twenty minutes) subjects would even report difficulty sensing whether their eyes were open or closed. Vision would ‘blank out’” (Massumi, 2002, p.145). By undergoing, as Brian Massumi notes, a “visual experience of the visually unexperienceable”, viewers found themselves “lost” in vision (2002, p.147). Whether subjects reported a perception of a dense whiteout or a foggy blackout, by missing a steady identifiable or recognizable object, focus or differentiated faculties, the Ganzfeld experiments cultivated structurally unstructured experiences.

Paradoxically, the apparent fixity of gradients of luminous intensity unfixed vision from its usual operation as viewers practised an uncommon mode of perception or manifestation of the visual – even if it ultimately resulted in the appearance of hallucinations and apparitions.

The “pure vision” experiments resonate with James Turrell’s *Ganzfeld* installations (1988–), where visitors encounter a visual field comprised of the same brightness and colour. As viewers step into spaces of coloured light almost “tangible in density”, they struggle to determine their coordinates in, and outlines of the room that they are in, and even unable to differentiate if the colours and shapes they see, derive from their own imagination or actually radiate in space (Bishop, 2005, p.84–85). Reducing, heightening or stretching the field of vision frustrates conventional sensory experiences, to the point where, as Claire Bishop suggests, Turrell’s installations

are spaces of withdrawal that suspend time and orphan us from the world.
[...] Turrell describes the works as situations where “imaginative seeing and outside seeing meet, where it becomes difficult to differentiate between seeing from the inside and seeing from the outside”. (2005, p.85)

In other words, instead of producing experiences where the viewer sees herself seeing, which arguably draw attention to perception itself, for Bishop, the extreme effects elicited by these expansive brightly coloured spaces actually upset the ability to reflect on one’s perception (2005, p.87). That said, even if not fully provoking conscious reflection on what is in sight or the questioning of how one sees, *Ganzfeld* still expands or modifies the visual faculties from which sense – including frustrated or disrupted sense – is made. To borrow from Massumi, “[t]he eyes, astrain in the fog, took the leap of producing its own variations from the endogenous (self-caused) retinal firings” (2002, p.149). Visions (including imaginative and hallucinatory ones) can at once emerge and dissolve, take form and disappear, shift and reform as they establish new and alternative perceptions despite, or precisely because of, the inability to see clearly. Thus, Turrell’s coloured spaces can also be seen as vague since one cannot distinguish *exactly* where things begin and end. While some of their properties or qualities can be perceived but not fully grasped, the *Ganzfeld* installations confound conventional perceptual clarity. Moreover, hovering between different understandings, seeing and unseeing, the installations echo the movement of vagueness – not a movement-towards determinate vision but a movement-between: between the concrete light meeting the retina and the blanking-out of vision; the challenge to habitual modes of perception; and the emergence of alternative ways of making sense borne of obstructed clarity.

Such a movement is also evident in Ann Veronica Janssens' *Mist Rooms* (2001–), in which visitors are not only disoriented in light but also bewildered by fog as they enter illuminated spaces filled with dense colourful mist. In *Blue, Red and Yellow* (2001–), for example, as viewers meander through the haze-filled pavilion, different coloured light shifts the shade of fog from yellow to blue to red, obfuscating clarity. Janssens' installations seek to transform perception "by slowing it down" (Bal, 2013, p.135). As viewers encounter an obscure space produced by mist and different coloured light, the habitual flow of perception is suspended: fog obstructs reference points and diminishes conventional perceptions of spatial relations by defying clear focus, precision, orientation and sensibility. However, in these moments of contumacious visibility, sight is not damaged, broken or no longer useful. As the eye takes time to (re)adjust when deciphering what appears before it, perception is delayed and stretched, and "cannot just happen in an instant; instead it must emerge" (Bal, 2013, p.39), demanding more time to make (any kind of) sense of what is seen. So while overwhelming onlookers, clarity is unsettled but not entirely lost. As shimmering fog disrupts the acuity of vision, Janssens establishes moments of visual instability, "reduced to the barest essence of seeing below the threshold of representation" (Bal, 2013, p.104; see Welton, 2017). Again, light does not necessarily illuminate *something* or direct vision, nor is it an attempt to represent or capture natural phenomena. In lieu, Janssens offers an invitation to marvel, wander through and make sense of arrangements of light, shade and suspended droplets. Rather than fixed and fully formed objects of perception, viewers encounter images or apparitions in their making, constantly suspended and in formation. Counter to the "blinking-out" of vision produced through *Ganzfeld*, visitors are not stranded in a total field of vision. When peering through the blurring mist, shapes – and, occasionally, fellow visitors – are still somewhat decipherable. However, beyond a thick "filter" of colourful smog, they are not seen clearly. Elucidating her motivation, Janssens explains how "sometimes you have to erase reality – erase what's visible – in order to see something else. To make the invisible visible in fact" (2020, n.p.). In this vein, Janssens' work can be seen as an attempt to offset visuality in favour of a return to vision (in Foster's terms). By means of opaque and foggy entities, she calls for a revision of what is seen, advocating for a broader understanding of vision, which adopts more creative and imaginative engagements. As gradients of luminosity shift and the air fills and moves around the room, perceptions and images are continuously morphing: in the midst of mist, both visions and water droplets are in perpetual suspension, constantly shapeshifting, forming and reforming as light illuminates beyond clear recognition.

Critically, vagueness "cannot be resolved"; it inhibits "any final and decisive conclusion, offering, at best, a tentative or potential interpretation" (Sørensen, 2015, p.748). In that sense, and through their perceptual obscurity and sensory manipulation, the blurry mist rooms, *Ganzfeld* installations

and the dazzling design of *J3RR1* can dismantle existing perceptions, as vision is unable to clearly determine what is seen. In the absence of clear focus, or concrete formation and identification of objects in sight, nothing takes precedence. Notwithstanding their brightness, these works are not bound by fixity and therefore extend the opportunity to break free from the dominance (or assumed legitimacy) of clarity and vision. Disrupting hierarchical systems or scopic regimes that appear to maintain the status quo formed by “one essential vision”, these light compositions challenge the privilege of a single, stable or constant point of view. Emphasizing the multiplicity of experiences, the indeterminacy of not seeing clearly can produce hazy visions that invite viewers to pause, reassess or even reform their typical mode of (visual) perception, revealing in its place a plurality of ways in which objects of sight could be encountered and new perspectives adopted.

Light, but dim

From glaring and foggy visions, I turn to the lower end of the intensity scale as this part of the chapter moves on to reflect on the use of low lighting within my own practice-research. Informed by the examples examined above, to enhance the study of visual obfuscation, I evaluate the insights emerging from my process of devising *Overcast* (2017) and my experimentation and making of theatre in the dark using light. *Overcast* utilized darkness, haze and various lighting compositions to simulate the “creation” and emergence of clouds as well as to attempt to emulate experiences of being immersed in or looking through mist – vague experiences of thwarted clarity. By reflecting on the partial/obscure images generated in *Overcast*, I am able to focus on fleeting and indistinct occurrences for which I (as a performance maker) set out the stimuli for. These “unbearably” dim compositions were set as an invitation to see with/through lack of precision or distinctness. Continuing to resist fixity and clear recognition, and delineating the significance of these compositions, I suggest that dimness or near-darkness might unsettle or reorientate different sensory encounters with the world. Rather than affirming that in such meagre lighting viewers do not see or see nothing, I argue that such designs can once again elicit alternative perceptions that do not rely on predetermined or set identifications. As darkness and gloom alternately bring forward and withdraw visual opportunities, they can equally destabilize persistent ocular illusions stemming from clarity, and thus resist the dominance of the visual (and other similar biases) through theatre practice and design.

Accordingly, I propose low lighting and partial images as practical strategies to generate obscure impressions leading to the questioning of vision’s reliability. These performative tactics are

intrinsically linked, yet as low light might imply a broader state of diffuse illumination, I also name partial images as a performative device, where light sources (bright or otherwise) pierce through darkness but only reveal part of the object in sight, producing incomplete or indefinite impressions. Performances such as Ad Infinitum's *Light* (2016), Ultimate Dancer and Robbie Thomson's *YAYAYA AYAYAY* (2017) and Darkfield's *Flight* (2018) used various degrees of low and diffused lighting to create blurry or undecided percepts drowning and resurfacing from the umbra. In a similar vein, *Overcast* sought to destabilize the appearance of one audience member to another, using low lights as undependable sources that shift and alter how one looks and what one sees.

Overcast hosts four audience members around a table. On it is a bowl of water, along with white floury powder which is scattered to create random shapes and constellations. As audience members enter the (fairly large) space, two bright beams of light help them find their way. Albeit in shadows, the table is still visible, concentrated in the middle of the space, and framed by four lighting "booms", one behind each chair. Once the audience is seated, the beams begin to gently fade and, halfway through the fade, light suddenly cuts out. In darkness, different voices begin to describe unclear images (blended descriptions of three Turner paintings). Unexpectedly, the loud pulsing sound of a smoke machine fills the space. It is followed by a gentle brush of air and the sound of rippling water, which softly fades in. Then, extremely dim or hazy "images" begin to emerge, playing with the tone and volume of murk and gloom. First, a low frosty beam slowly appears. As this becomes brighter, or as the audience is more accustomed to its very low intensity, both light and the blurry image begin to solidify: they appear somewhat sharper, more discernible. It is the water bowl, and the light reflects the water on the ceiling. Second, a strip of warm-orange light above the audience's head shines through the slowly moving haze, encouraging viewers to look up. Light then directs attention to the table, which suddenly seems to glow in the dark. Finally, an extended composition of white and blue lighting emerges above and behind the audience, creating multiple vague and hallucinatory silhouettes, outlines and distorted images. The haze shapeshifts around the space and dips in and out of light to simulate the experience of being immersed in fog. As with the bright designs discussed in the previous section, light in *Overcast* was designed to draw attention to itself (whether source, beam or colour) and to the subtle and often unnoticed movements of air and haze, seeking to alter the visitors' sense of space and, crucially, the appearance of fellow audience members sitting around the table.

Experimenting with thresholds of visibility and luminosity and entangling light and darkness, the lighting compositions in *Overcast* were given time to unfold and get accustomed to, but not enough intensity to fix visions. As low lighting faded in and out it recreated the coordinates of space, shifting

its edges and what was decipherable in it. In such low lighting, the perception of accurate detail was arguably removed; fellow viewers and objects were reduced to ambiguous figures. The outlines of what was visible became almost fluid, as physical or solid forms lost their expected definition. For example, the angle and level of light altered the bowl's appearance, to the point where its shape and presence were rendered fuzzy (see colour plate 19). Confounding vision and clarity (in the performance and documentation image alike), the narrow beams that illuminated the translucent bowl suspended its materiality. This faint beam facilitated the slow re-emergence of the image as it indicated that there is something to see. Yet, attempting to deliberately confound clarity, its intensity hindered the appearance of the image as a distinguishable one. As such, it offered a more flexible view of the object. Similarly, when light appeared behind the audience, silhouettes took time to form as the thick haze extended and re-formed people's outlines, features and shadows, emphasizing light's ability to mediate and modulate (objects of) perception. Such a constellation of haze and dimness attempted to generate moments where one was unable "to see the image clearly", but also an image that "may be perceived as unclear due to its vague boundaries" (Sørensen, 2016, p.747). As gloom thickened, under the cover of haze the limits of the body grew indistinct, merging bodies and surroundings. In this vein, familiar perceptions of fellow audience members were deferred and suspended, making room for new or alternative apprehensions. For me, in such low intensities, light appeared as thick brushstrokes, and haze seemed denser and more impenetrable. While it slowly faded in, light became more noticeable, almost tangible (as light hit the haze/dust particles), but as it remained dim and faint, light turned out to be fleeting and ungraspable. Ultimately, *Overcast* sought to create a state of fuzzy vision, which simultaneously revealed and concealed. Unable to clearly decide or make sense through vision, light obscured clarity from what one can see, while inviting (re-)envisioning of what/how one might see. In that sense, the images gave up their optical clarity in favour of their material presence, but even this was deliberately made hard to establish.

Unlike most of the examples discussed above, partial images still rely on light to illuminate *something*. Nevertheless, light does not passively support the display of certain entities. Accordingly, dimness manifests itself through a dance of revelation, manipulation and occlusion. In such low intensities, by (partially) illuminating particular "scenes", light draws attention to itself as an object of mediation, underscoring its capacity to influence, transform or distort visual faculties and apprehensions through vision. Notably, as Welton asserts, "the darkness suggested by 'gloom' is one that is hard – but not impossible – to see into" (2017, p.246). As opposed to the removal of all light sources, which breeds the unique visual modality of *seeing darkness*, the murky state of gloom still retains some (visual) reference points that intermingle with darkness. Both darkness and gloom are

able to eschew clarity and disrupt one's spatial sensibility, leaving viewers to ponder on their own engagements with their surroundings. However, in contrast with a total absence of illuminated visual cues, by setting specific points of focus in space through (relative) brightness partial images punctuate darkness and produce an altered perceptual experience. Avoiding the reductive interpretation of negated vision, as visual faculties are not entirely removed, dim and incomplete images can still direct the eye, while hindering perception by rendering uncertain what might appear and emerge from the shadows.

As discussed, in *Overcast*, I attempted to create palpable yet unstable images, heightened by the blurry boundaries of mist. Moreover, the performance was framed as simulating the experience of being immersed in clouds but by no means attempted direct representation of that experience. Investigating indeterminate and diffuse entities and vague phenomena such as clouds and fog and their presence in low lighting, I attempted to undermine the audience's ability to determine what they see, questioning the appearance and credibility of visual faculties: whether it is the shape of a cloud or the subtle passage of air, a radiant silhouette of the person sitting across the table, or a figure of their imagination. These intentionally muffled images sought to go beyond clear recognition, definitiveness or classification, shifting perspectives (sometimes literally) and offering multiple possible meanings, interpretations and affective resonances.

Barbra Erwine affirms that "[t]he brightest node is usually perceived as the most important" (2017, p.65). "Since people are phototropic (tending to move toward the light)", she notes, "a pool of light with darker space surrounding it focuses attention" (Erwine, 2017, p.65). When clarifying this physiological trait, Erwine alludes to Foster's scopic regimes and Bleeker's institutions of perspective, both of which deem certain visions as more significant, valuable or worthy of being seen. Yet in *Overcast*, the cloudiness of/in both dimness and mist turned objects in/of sight unstable by rendering those focal points obscure, *clearly indistinct*. In contrast to traditionally "well-lit" images, the murky images that invited the audience to look through haze did not seek to verify, define or pin down any facts. Though low lighting may have helped with an initial orientation in the dark by retaining points of concentration, or indeed directing the eye to brighter entities, the dimness of lights tried to unfix and destabilize the images formed: in this way the work resisted a single firm interpretation, continuously challenging the nature of its encounter, generating a mode of seeing unclearly, where one cannot "conclude" what or who is in sight.

Consequently, I suggest that (low) lighting design and the composition of gloomy states can be understood as a strategy to break the habitual flow of visual perception. In *Overcast*, despite the invitation to see things (clouds, silhouette, shadows, shapes) the images do not champion or

prioritize one particular view but encourage looking through multiple perspectives. Looking, for instance, at the water bowl as it is lit from different angles altered its appearance rendering the object unfamiliar. However, this is not only a process of estrangement or de-familiarization. Rather, and recalling the hover of vagueness, in much the same way as the “clouds” in *Overcast* shifted and moved, moulded and dissipated, so did the images produced. Restlessly transforming, due to their constant reconfiguration and interaction with light, objects in sight became indefinite and unclear, as eyes could not resolve what they encountered. Such a view(ing) offers an unusual way of looking, which can liberate the eye from the implicit political desire “to fix us with its deadening stare” (Bal, 2013, p.265). As low lighting dims the definiteness of vision – through, for example, making depth, distance and boundaries unclear or illuminating half the object – it renders the relationship with visual faculties continuously in formation. These cloudy images destabilize the definiteness of vision and encourage a constant sense of re-viewing, wandering between diverse interpretations or perspectives, where meaning does not persist. As Graham explains, light invites “the audience to see the space and bodies in its path *in a certain way*”, and this call to see “in a certain way” can determine “the seer’s initial engagement with the work” (Graham, 2018a, p.126, emphasis in original). This can be understood as either seeing unequivocally or in one of many available ways of encountering the visual. Attempting to escape the regime of clarity, I have tried to emphasize the latter, doing so by inviting audiences to see *in an uncertain way*. In dimness, the invitation to constantly re-assemble objects of sight might facilitate a new encounter that does not stem from usual and predetermined recognition. Instead of prioritizing one singular view, perceptions become more plural as gloom makes room for the inclusion of different and novel points of view.

Lighting beyond recognition

Sitting opposite each other, across a table outcropping from the mist, we catch glimpses of obscure appearances of materials, phenomena and fellow audience members (see plate 19). Manifesting as shadows, silhouettes or murky displays, the fuzzy impressions produced in *Overcast* and the other case studies explored in this chapter elucidate how the wax and wane of light and darkness might generate instances of not seeing clearly. Looking at these vague images – whether live or recorded, through equally confounding pieces of documentation that seek to (accurately) capture unstable moments of challenged visibility – one is left to decipher clearly indistinct illuminations. Rather than attempting to render objects visibly clear, the different lighting compositions I discussed, aimed to reveal and reclaim “many visualities”, countering and critiquing perceptions and biases ironed by “one essential vision”. Obviously, the perceptual uncertainty produced by these designs is not

limited to visual experiences and can extend to other sense modalities. Yet, as light can shape perception and influence how things are seen and understood, in my endeavour to disturb the relentless regime of clarity, and trouble different predispositions that result from the alleged certainty accompanying vision, light becomes a significant instrument to interrupt expected encounters with the visible. Recognizing the discursive and historical shaping of vision that is still at play in the background, the shaping of vision that I dealt with here is a compositional-dramaturgical one, which tackles visibility by attempting to evoke altered perceptual and sensory encounters, where the different arrangements and orchestrations of light render objects of perception fuzzy or indistinct. I acknowledge that the ocular focus of this chapter might appear to reinforce a (false) priority of vision. However, by turning to both ends of the intensity scale, I have argued that light can actually upset fixity and suspend preconceptions and, in turn, reveal the plurality of ways in which objects of sight could be apprehended. By hindering clear and distinct recognitions and identifications of visual faculties, these glares and glimmers potentially resist expected and privileged points of view, breaking the habitual flow of perception. Consequently, the vagueness emerging from these low and dazzling lights can suggest new modes of sense-making, shifting understandings within the politics of perception.

Critically, in my own practice-research and in this chapter, I have shown how light and darkness can introduce a variety of encounters and understandings of what is seen, pushing viewers to contemplate what they see, or choose to see. These multiple possible exchanges might be eliminated through apparent clarity, but in gloom, murk or extreme brilliance, they may coexist simultaneously, without adhering to a single interpretation. Continuously hovering between different states, these critical visions highlight the pluralization of perception, working to undermine the certainty which seeing tricks us into, “a false sense that the world is as it is: not changeable and subject to change” (Kendrick, 2017, p.128). While certain institutions of perspective fix habitual modes of looking, thereby fostering the notion that this is the only way the world is or can be, other views might reveal that things are not always as they seem. By encouraging not seeing clearly and moving between the literal and metaphorical, lighting design can, as I have proposed, move us to look beyond recognition. Whether around the table of *Overcast*, in colourful mist or vibrant *Ganzfeld*, light challenges or suspends typical apprehensions, revealing different possibilities for seeing and being-with others. In other words, and seen in generative terms, not seeing clearly introduces new vantage points and invites viewers to look in other directions, apply alternative focuses, practise more diverse perspectives, adopt new outlooks and conceive more inclusive views that do not prioritize a singular or fixed vision.