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Aesthetics, materiality and meaning-making in scenographic light

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The scope of light's scenographic action is vast and complex, and even somewhat weird. There is a fundamental strangeness to the light that ebbs and flows through a performance, to the constructed light that operates on an ever-shifting rhythm, that can transform objects in its path, and that creates instability around all that it envelops. In the creative and experiential encounter of performance, light sits between the material and the immaterial; we can sense its shifts kinaesthetically, we can trace its path through space and feel as though it could be apprehended haptically; light itself cannot actually be touched, and yet – if we are close enough to the sources – we can feel its heat on the skin, or, following Bachelard (1988), be drawn to reverie by its rhythms and glimmers. In addition to these bodily sensations of light, there is also, throughout the Western philosophical tradition, a metaphorical relationship between light and understanding. In an essay charting provocative and generative capacities of light, Joanne Zerdy and Marlis Schweitzer note that metaphorical resonances of light contribute to its material affectivity in performance, but also that such metaphors 'help us to read and interpret collective cultural and artistic performances in a fresh, new way' (2016, p.17). Elsewhere, Hans Blumenberg charts the history of light as a metaphor for truth, arguing that changing metaphors of light underpin wider shifts in world-understanding and self-understanding (1993, p.31). In this vein, common practices of theatrical lighting, such as 'selective visibility' (McCandless, 1958;

Pilbrow, 1997), directing the eye of the seer towards the 'most important' elements, are manifestations of a kind of thinking in practice. Accordingly, the traditionally established values of clarity in theatrical lighting are deeply tied to notions of representational seeing and to ideas of light as a means of providing understanding.

As a material of performance, then, light is both a substance that is encountered through the body, and a material that provides an offer to the imagination, indicating or presenting ideas in performance. This plurality, or this enfolding of the sensory and the cognitive, is an important, though under-explored, aspect of light's operation and its significance in performance. As Joslin McKinney (2013) has persuasively argued, the experiential encounter with scenography is a valuable site of understanding, and, moreover, the denigration of the bodily encounter with performance, or spectacle – tracing back in Western theatrical traditions to Aristotle – is productively troubled by scenographic practices which 'can stimulate aesthetic and intellectual engagement with the world rather than simply provide a diversion from it' (McKinney, 2013, p.64). In the same vein, there remains a great deal more to be explored about the nature of light in performance and about the generative and meaning-making potential of this immaterial material.

In tracing such generative and meaning-making potentiality of light in performance, this chapter uses the term 'scenographic light' to encapsulate the range and depth of light's operation in live performance. With the term 'scenographic light' I mean to do two things. First, quite simply, I intend to explicitly position light in relation to scenography. Light is widely acknowledged as a constituent of scenography, but there remains more to be uncovered about the particular ways in which light works to inscribe meaning in space and time as an interlocutor in performance. Through the expansion of its scholarship in recent years, scenography has come to be 'formally instated as a significant contributor to the production of knowledge' (Collins and Aronson, 2015, p.2), recognized as 'a distinct strategy for how theatre happens' (Hann, 2019, p.6) and a mode of 'doing, being and thinking' (McKinney and Palmer, 2017, p.16). While there may be a tension in claiming for a particular element a phenomenon that emerges through the confluence of materials in the event of performance, the term 'scenographic light' holds that the action and affectivity of light in performance must be considered in relation to broader contexts of dramaturgical and material operations of scenography, dramaturgy and performance, and indeed that close examination of light in performance enriches understandings of these.

The second, and perhaps more interesting, aim in the use of the term 'scenographic light' is to conceive of light as an explicitly active force in performance. By demonstrating light's unique mode of inscribing meaning in space and time as specifically scenographic, I hope to make clear

that light is not only an important constituent of scenography but also a consequential and active component of performance. Contemporary thinking about scenography provides a useful foundation for this conception of light as an active performance element because it opens avenues of thinking about performance in which material, sensual and spatiotemporal experience become key factors in the reading of performance. Scenography encompasses multiple interactions – and, following Karen Barad (2007), intra-actions – between and among elements within space and the ways these interactions impact on the events unfolding. Significantly, expanded scenographic thinking foregrounds the experience of the spectator, and in so doing provides a lens with which to explore the 'spatial, multisensorial and material aspects of contemporary performance' (McKinney and Palmer, 2017, p.2). As a performance material that is at once affective, dramaturgical and ephemeral, light is an especially rich material to examine in this way. Much of the task of thinking scenographically, or thinking about what scenography does, involves attending to the relationships, and interrelationships, between bodies and space, between performers and audience and between space and stuff. Through its complex and multiple entanglements, scenographic light provides a provocative means of encountering shared materiality, where things are, to borrow Jane Bennett's phrasing, 'inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations' (2010, p.13).

Drawing on the framework provided in the term 'scenographic light' this chapter explores light's relationship with meaning-making in performance, arguing that this occurs through an affectivity that is principally aesthetic. This is not to say that light is principally a decorative or visual medium, but rather that it involves the complex modes of engagement that occur through aesthetic apprehension. As Timothy Morton argues, when 'you make or study art you are not exploring some kind of candy on the surface of a machine. You are making or studying causality. The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension' (2013, pp.19–20). There are some productive connections between Morton's understanding of aesthetics as causality and Erika Fischer-Lichte's performance aesthetics that is centred on the possibility of a transformative exchange between performer and audience, where spectatorship is an activity in which the aesthetic experience of performance becomes 'an enabling factor' that allows for different and individual responses (2016, p.177). For Paul Crowther, the aesthetic operation of theatre is significant beyond 'mere entertainment' and is also an 'aesthetic education' for an audience (2019, p.104). Though he recognizes that the 'importance of the stage setting cannot be underestimated' (Crowther, 2019, p.104), Crowther's analysis of theatre aesthetics centres around the skill of actors, directors and playwrights. While it is significant that Crowther includes theatre within his wider argument that 'art's transformative effects involve *aesthetic self-becoming* – wherein

embodied subjects of all kinds can experience the world in a fuller way' (2019, p.1), his account leaves much scope for a deeper examination of the material conditions of performance and the enmeshed relations of scenographic practice. The performances discussed in this chapter are drawn from beyond the frame of dramatic theatre explored by Crowther, and yet by exploring the role of light in these examples it is possible to identify capacities of light that expand existing understandings of performance aesthetics.

Metaphor and material

Light is a polysemic phenomenon; designed light may serve to direct attention, to evoke a particular setting or mood, or may trigger a range of sensorial responses, including those beyond a designer's intention. Akin to the way McKinney writes about scenographic spectacle, there is an 'unruliness' to light in performance in that it 'makes a direct appeal to the body of the individual spectator and at the same time communicates images and ideas that spectators hold in common' (2013, p.74). The images and ideas that spectators hold in common in relation to light owe as much to cultural conceptions as to constructed similarities. 'Seeing light', Cathryn Vasseleu writes, 'is a metaphor for seeing the invisible in the visible' (1998, p.3) and the symbolism of this idea recurs in much dramatic theatre.[1] As Blumenberg writes,

> Light can be a directed beam, a guiding beacon in the dark, an advancing dethronement of darkness, but also a dazzling superabundance, as well as an indefinite, omnipresent brightness containing all: the 'letting-appear' that does not itself appear, the inaccessible accessibility of things. (1993, p.31)

Though this metaphorical link between light and understanding aligns with traditions of Western philosophy, the concept falters when considered with close reference to experiential conditions of light. The artist and researcher Barbara Bolt, for example, critiques this supposed connection between light and enlightenment, arguing – in virtue of the embodied experience of sunlight in her native Australia – that the idea of light revealing or uncovering what is there is one forged by a distinctly European experience of sun. For Bolt, the experience of living in the blazing light of the antipodean sun precludes absolutely the possibility of understanding (sun) light as a force of revelation. The glare of the Australian sun, for Bolt, conceals more than it reveals: 'Too much light on the matter sheds no light on the matter' (2004, p.124). The sunlight of her experience is one that necessitates a downward glance in order to see; raising one's eye line is to have one's vision bleached out by the sun.

Bolt's argument about lived experiences of the glare of the Australian sun shows that different experiential configurations of light can reformulate relationships with the conceptual. Performance, too, offers myriad ways of encountering light that depart from natural light and thus might offer new potential imaginaries. Bolt argues that the bodily encounter with the glare of the Australian sun 'takes apart the Enlightenment triangulation of light, knowledge and form' (2004, p.131) and thus demands a reconfiguration of the relationship between light and matter. This invitation to rethink the relationship between light and matter is, in the case of the Australian landscape, rooted in colonial history, of European colonizers imposing aesthetic and social constructs that were particular and not universal. Bolt argues that the bodily experience of the blinding glare of the Australian sun, in which light cannot be used to render form legible, does not only propel one towards 'a reaction against representation, but provides a different model of mapping the world altogether' (Bolt, 2004, p.137). This chapter argues that performance light may be a paradigmatic site for exploring these constructs, not only because differential experiences of light map on to a realm in which light is constructed and offered within what Hann calls the 'crafted ecology' (2019, p.20) of scenography but also because the particular materiality of light, its ephemerality, its challenges to tangibility and its imbrication with everything else offer a specific mode of aesthetic operation that enables ways of understanding intra-action.

Scenographic light in action: Three performance examples

In line with Bolt's insights about the situatedness of the encounter with light, and following Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's provocation that 'Every practice is a mode of thought, already in the act' (2014, vii), this chapter will now think *with* the light in three productions, as key points of orientation in exploring how the experience of light shapes the ecology of performance. The performances in question are *Plexus,* a piece of contemporary dance from Compagnie III (2015); Heiner Goebbels' *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* (2018); and Invisible Flock's installation performance, *Aurora* (2018). Each of these works features a distinct sensorial and dramaturgical configuration of light and considered in tandem they reveal much about the features and capacities of scenographic light in performance, elucidating the potential of light as both a material and medium in broader contexts.

Plexus features a single dancer, Kaori Ito, on an enormous floating structure, suspended by 5,000 cords through and around which she moved.

Aurélien Bory was both choreographer and scenographer for the production, a fact which may, in part, account for the foregrounding of the scenographic materials. A result of this foregrounding is that light, space and the body seem to coalesce within the aesthetic offer of the performance. Over the course of the performance, Ito moves throughout the space of the structure, sometimes pulling herself through the cords, sometimes suspended by them. The density of the tensioned cords makes traversing this space an act of negotiation for the dancer, but also creates a layering of textures as the light ripples through rows upon rows of dense black ropes. In much the same way that haze makes beams of light prominent in space, the cords here catch the light, making its every shift perceptible. Additionally, the movement in both the cords and the light creates a sense of light as a palpable, shimmering thing; every change in light is accentuated and every shaft of light is made distinct. To this end, the dominance of the light in *Plexus* seems to gain a material reality and can be read in terms of its physical presence. In the sheer materiality of its performance, then, *Plexus* focuses on the 'sensuous givenness' (Seel, 2005, p.22) of light as an aesthetic substance that is interwoven with the action of the dancer on stage.

By contrast, Heiner Goebbels' *Everything that Happened and Would Happen,* performed in an enormous, cavernous space in Manchester, centred around slippery relationships between bodies, space, materials and light. While *Plexus* hinges on the evolving interaction between a lone dancer and a single, if enormous, structure, *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* is driven by a large cast of actors hauling objects and materials through a vast space and forming them into new configurations and assemblages. Alongside these physical assemblies, light reaches across the space – as both light and as projection – and forms and reforms images which never fully resolve but are endlessly mutable. It creates geometric patterns in the space, at times creating kinetic optical illusions in which the architecture of the space seems to shift. Performers busy themselves with flight cases and set pieces (all of which were originally designed by Klaus Grünberg for a 2012 production of *John Cage: Europeras 1&2,* directed by Goebbels, and are repurposed here as part of the fabric of the emerging performance). These materials are continually manipulated and re-formed into fleeting structures, assemblages or impositions in space. Throughout the performance, light enfolds all it touches in a reciprocal relationship of instability.

The third performance discussed here, *Aurora*, unfolded between environment, materials and audience without the presence of (human) performers. Commissioned by Liverpool city council, and created by the Leeds-based interactive arts company Invisible Flock, *Aurora* brought its audience inside a cavernous Victorian reservoir, built in 1845 to house two

million gallons of water. This performance installation, held by Ellie Barrett as an example of an art practice that tackles material 'head on' (2019, p.7), explores the interactions between tangible and intangible substances in ways that raise potent questions about scenographic encounters. On entering, the space was dark, filled with haze and appeared to be completely flooded with water. We were instructed to keep to the path around the space, and this was outlined with laser beams just hovering above the surface of the water. Across the seeming vastness of this space, blocks of ice would appear and disappear, seeming to glow from within as the light caught their slippery surfaces. The audience navigated a darkened space, flooded with water, with light pulsing between dozens of blocks of ice that slowly melted into a central pool. This was underlaid with a soundscape of music and field recordings taken of glaciers in Iceland. Water was both the principal subject and the core object of this piece, not only in the flooding of the floor but also in its transformed states of ice and steam. Furthermore, by pairing the mutability of water with the ephemerality of light and sound, the scenographic offering of *Aurora* exploited the fundamental properties of these materials as a means of examining its wider themes. The scale of the installation unfolded through continually shifting light that revealed clusters of sculptural ice as well as hidden recesses in the space. Thus, the focus on ephemeral materials in this piece – sound, light, melting ice – makes it an especially interesting proposition to consider in terms of its objects.

In discussing each of these, I offer my experience as a spectator as a means of accessing detail about how light worked in the encounter with each performance. McKinney and Palmer argue that the perspective of the spectator has proved productive in the development of scenographic scholarship, because it highlights the embodied nature of scenographic experience, and emphasizes performance as an event that is encountered rather than as something that might be analysed on the basis of 'static artefacts or on the intentions of the artist' (2017, p.8). By drawing close attention to what becomes possible through light in these particular examples, I hope to unpick some of the ways that light makes meaning in performance more generally. Building from attentiveness to the action of light in each performance, the analysis here aims to follow the experiential encounter with light as both medium and material of these performances, and in turn to connect these experiences with wider thinking on the nature of light. The three examples included here speak to light's potential as a meaning-making material of performance but they are not presented as a totalizing survey of modes of performance light. Rather, thinking with and through the particular materiality of light in these examples puts forward some of the ways in which light can operate as an agent of meaning-making in performance, and argues for its significance as a scenographic material.

Trick of the light

Plexus begins with a moment of deception. When the house lights fade, the audience is left in nearly complete darkness. Out of this darkness, three beams of light gradually fade up, appearing murky as though through dense haze or fog. These beams appear to float above the stage, reaching about halfway to the stage floor from the ceiling. These then fade out and are replaced by footlights, revealing the dancer, Kaori Ito, at the front of the stage. Behind her, there is a structure of some kind, covered entirely in a piece of black silk, and it was this that lent the sense of fog to the previous moment. Ito stands in front of the structure, with the silk at her back, and is lit by two visible lanterns at her feet. She uses a microphone, apparently to amplify the sound of her heartbeat and her breath, although it was unclear if this sound is being produced live or is recorded. Next, she starts to lean back against the silk, causing it to billow around her in the light, like waves. Finally, she begins to push back into the silk, wedging her body and the fabric through the cords. She continues to burrow backwards until the whole silk drops down around her and she pulls it back into the darkness behind her.

Light's opening gesture here – the appearance of the three strangely truncated beams – seems to announce the presence of light as something to be attended to in itself. The moment is fleeting; there was not enough time to clearly discern the silk, so the floating, hazy beams of light emerge as faint objects without immediate purpose or usefulness. Although the light is directed towards the silk, it does not illuminate the fabric such that it becomes clearly visible. In this moment my attention was held by the light beams appearing, and the uncertainty in the murky quality of the image. As a spectator, I was not at all sure of what I was seeing until the dancer appeared in front of the silk. This change, from hazily present beams of light, hanging high in the space, to footlights directed towards the dancer immediately sets up a kind of dialogue between the light and the dancer's body. The first act of light is not to make visible but to *be* visible; only afterwards does it reveal the presence of the dancer. First there is light, then there is a dancer in light. Both are given as aspects of the production to be experienced in themselves. Aronson observes that this degree of force is a prominent feature of light in modern dance, where:

> It is no longer tied to motivational sources but has taken on a physical force, making it a performer within the dance. Light is a force that draws dancers toward it; it is a force that pushes dancers across a stage; a wall of light may act as resistance against a dancer or create a sort of curtain through which the audience must struggle to see. (2005, p.35)

Aronson's discussion here of light's power in modern dance is tied to a conception of it as an active material agent within the unfolding dance. The language Aronson employs here is explicitly physical; light can push, resist and form walls, or block visibility. Such an understanding provides a productive frame for light as a *scenographic* power. Discussing light as a material with the power to compel a dancer to move, frames it as a material element and enables consideration of light as a bodily substance in performance. Thinking of light in bodily terms aligns with Reynolds' idea of kinaesthetic empathy in dance, in which it is not purely a dancer's body that triggers an affective response but the 'dance's body' (in Reynolds and Reason, 2011, p.123). Drawing from Vivian Sobchack's term 'the film's body', Reynolds uses the idea of the dance's body to convey the 'shared materiality and affective flow' of movement (Reynolds and Reason, 2011, p.123). Through this kind of kinaesthetic engagement with the emerging choreographed movement, the experience of watching dance blurs distinctions between individual bodies or movements such that, rather than seeing individual bodies move away from or towards each other on the stage, one instead sees the dance spread and gather. The dance's body in *Plexus*, then, encompasses Ito's body, the shimmering space of the cords, and the material shifting of the light, together with the affective responses and engagements of the spectator.

Light as aesthetic material

Perhaps inherent in the form of contemporary dance is an emphasis on more dispersed structures of meaning (Bleeker, 2015, p.67). Recent scholarship on dramaturgy in dance (as in, for example Hansen and Callison, 2015; Warner, 2016) speaks to the increasingly collaborative status of dance dramaturgy – both among collaborators in the rehearsal process and among multiple elements in the event of performance. There is a parallel here with Lehmann's discussion of 'parataxis' in postdramatic performance (2006, p.86). This is conceived as a kind of rebellion against the classical hierarchies of meaning in traditional theatre and as a means of liberating multiple elements in performance to contribute individually and collectively, without presenting immediate logical connections, and thus inviting the spectator to 'connections, correspondences and clues at completely unexpected moments' (Lehmann, 2006, p.87). Through this kind of attending, meaning is 'postponed', emerging over time rather than linearly or explicitly. Thus, the light here manifests as one element within a multifaceted aesthetic experience, and its role within that experience shifts and changes throughout. At times the light works to direct attention, or to pick Ito out against the large structure; at other times the light seems to

modify the available space of the cord-strung structure; at other times it seems to present a kind of force in the space, with an apparently haptic relationship to the dancer and the structure. Through this kind of manifold operation, the light here asserts that it is doing something in this experience in excess of its formal properties of light and dark.

Comparably dispersed structures of meaning are also in evidence in the other two examples discussed here. In the case of Goebbels' *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* elements are continually drawn together, a roving sculpture that never reaches a fixed point. Set elements, already recycled beyond their intended purpose, are hauled across the stage, pulled into shapes and assemblages that defy their intended use. This action is layered over and around excerpts from Patrik Ouředník's *Europeana*, a postmodern text that resists the possibility of a single perspective and in which the history of the twentieth century is relayed as a series of accumulative facts, sweeping through events with a flattened ontology of detail and observations.[2] Sarah Lucie has already argued that this is a production in which a 'dramaturgy of connectivity and accumulation creates an atmosphere in which events – ways in which the atmosphere is built, affected and then active in the creation of the next atmosphere – are the basic ontological unit' (2020, p.17). This, as Lucie demonstrates, creates a performance in which the dramaturgical project, of connection, co-creation and entanglement between the human and the non-human, becomes a manifestation of Barad's intra-action. For Barad,

> The notion of *intra-action* (in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which presumes the prior existence of independent entities or relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful. (2007, p.139)

This conceptual shift has been influential in expanded scenographic thinking, drawing an increased attentiveness to the agency and vibrancy of materials (Bennett, 2010) and relationships between human and non-human that are significant to both 'how scenography works and how spectators experience it' (McKinney and Palmer, 2017, p.13). In this context, the entanglement of light, space, bodies and objects in *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* articulates the relationality of intra-action. Light and projection are used to transform both the performance environment and the ways in which it is perceived, with directional shafts of light cutting through the space, and shifting patterns of projected light moving across the stage. Here, light is an indivisible material component of an 'assemblage' (Bennett, 2010) of materials; rather than a medium through which a subject is seen, it is a thing among

things co-constituting performance in the layered entanglement of bodies, space and stuff. In this cacophony of matter, light tracks across the vast space, shaping and reshaping the stage, but also joining with the flow of bodies and materials to create perilous sculptures, that seem to glow from within, or sometimes to draw light towards them. In the amalgam of light, materials and space it becomes impossible to think of light illuminating an already formed image; light is always already interfering, imbricating itself into the fabric of each shifting assemblage, and being remade in the meeting of light and matter. This is Barad's intra-action in action, the confluence of light, bodies and materials creating something new defined by the relationality between them. This disrupted causality exposes what is the case more generally; in their mutual transformation light and matter are each made anew. Bolt notes that we talk about 'shedding light on the matter' but not of any 'passage *from* matter *to* light' (2004, p.127). On a basic level, any lighting designer who has ever tried to look at a lighting state on an empty stage will know that light is made different by the presence of performers in it. But on a deeper level, this performance and its intense entanglement of shifting light and materials seems, to me as a spectator, to make their mutual and contingent transformation vivid.

Thinking through these examples, then, demonstrates something of the plasticity of scenographic light, but also its status as a kind of aesthetic material, distinct from other forms or appearances of light. There is, perhaps, a parallel between the aesthetic operation of light in these examples and Crowther's analysis of the structures of abstract art, in which he notes that abstract works of art engage 'virtual factors in excess of what they are as merely physical and/or formal visual configurations' (2009, p.101). An aesthetic experience of light within the context of performance occasions a certain kind of excess, in which the light invokes a kind of consciousness or a particular kind of attentiveness to or engagement with the performance material, beyond what might be possible otherwise. An aesthetic experience of light, then, is a product of an affective encounter. This is not necessarily an explicit process; as Fischer-Lichte attests, light in performance is often received on the very 'threshold of consciousness' (2008, p.119). Yet many contemporary works of performance, including those discussed here, foreground light, enabling instances of what Crowther terms the 'wondrous apprehension of thinghood' (2006, p.41). The aesthetic experience of attending to light in performance is thus related to the specific characteristics of performance as an event of encounter. This is especially evident in work such as *Plexus* where the material seems to embrace its sheer theatricality; there is no sense of mimesis here, or of direct representation, instead the work unfolds within its own reality, like what Lehmann terms a 'scenic poem' (2006, p.111). Martin Seel argues that aesthetic experience 'has to *happen* and can happen only if subjects become involved with the sensuous making present

of phenomena and situations that alter in an entirely unforeseen manner the subjects' sense of what is real and what is possible' (2008, p.100, emphasis added). The ways in which light works to shape understandings of what is real and what is possible underscores the extent to which the theatrical language of light relies on a symbiosis between form and content. In *Plexus,* we might recognize this symbiosis in the relationship(s) between movement, the body and light – or in the imbrication of body, space and light that is in evidence in different ways in both *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* and, as I will go on to show, *Aurora*. The content of the light involves what is in the light, but also the form of the light itself, as a visible beam. Furthermore, through this morass, and this parataxical coincidence of space, light and body, further kinds of content emerge, that of the affective or interpretational impressions experienced by the seer.

For Seel, the core facet of aesthetic understanding lies in the distinction between appearing and semblance. This distinction shifts emphasis away from appearance, or how things look per se, and towards appearing, or the dynamic play of appearances in a particular encounter. Further to this, Seel argues that when aesthetic perception becomes an event for the person perceiving this may be understood as aesthetic experience (2008, p.99). He also demonstrates that attentiveness to the presence of an aesthetic object calls attention, vividly, to our own presence. That, through the aesthetic encounter we 'allow ourselves to be abducted to presence. Aesthetic intuition is a radical form of residency in the here and now' (2005, p.33). I have argued elsewhere that the emphasis in Seel's work on emergence, temporality and event makes his concept especially relevant to an exploration of the nature of the aesthetic experience of performance (Graham, 2020a). This thinking is especially pertinent in relation to the ephemeral materiality of scenographic light as it is encountered in performance. Whereas an aesthetics of light based on appearance might seek to stress the image-making, or image-framing, capacity of light, attentiveness to the appearing of light speaks to its affectivity and its invitation to both embodied experience and imaginative encounter. This focus on temporality and encounter affirms understanding of scenography as something that happens (see, e.g. Svoboda in Burian 1974, p.15; Lotker and Gough, 2013; Hann, 2019, pp.67–77), and that the qualities and dynamism of this happening are integral to the ways in which scenographic process contribute to or construct meaning in performance. As Hann argues, 'Scenography is concerned not only with the material constructions of theatre, but how these constructions *relate* to one another; *relate* to the performers, *relate* to the spectators' (2019, p.72, emphasis in original). The aesthetic operation of scenographic light, then, is not concerned with the delivery of static images, or with a neutral revealing of what is already there, but in the contingent co-construction of a meaningful aesthetic event.

Haptic light

The emphasis on how light happens in these examples is in many ways emblematic of what Aronson describes as 'postmodern lighting' – in which light 'ebbs and flows, startles and surprises' reflecting a 'sense of instability' (2005, p.36). The happening or unfolding of light here is not only visual but also tangible. The foregrounding of physicality in *Plexus* seems to suggest that light is not only illuminating the cords but also *touching* them. This might be considered in terms of what Dempster describes as a 'haptic apprehension of space', noting that 'haptic perception fosters an intimate relationship with environment. The haptically attuned dancer is preoccupied with stage space; so too is the spectator' (2003, p.49). Dempster reasons that this sense of tangibility is acutely evident in dance spectatorship, where the kinaesthetic experience of watching entwines vision and touch (2003, p.46). In this framework, she draws on Gibson's ecological optics, noting how, in his work, processes of 'looking and seeing implicate us in the sensuous structure of the world' (Dempster, 2003, p.47). As Gibson argues, the overlap between looking and feeling is profound, as is the link between sensuous apprehension and action: 'the equipment for *feeling* is anatomically the same as the equipment for *doing*' (1968, p.99, emphasis in original). While Gibson's work, much like Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, is primarily concerned with processes of perception, and the position of the perceiving subject, his approach, and the language he employs around light are useful reference points in approaching what light, in itself, is doing. He notes that, in addition to providing 'a stimulus for vision' and 'information for perception', light can also be conceived as 'a physical energy' (1979, p.47). The sense of light as a physical energy seems crucial in *Plexus,* where the interplay of body, space and light lies at the heart of the action. This bodily conception of light – or what Aronson terms its 'physical force' (2005, p.35) – is crucial in terms of understanding what light itself is doing in this performance. The physicality implied in these descriptions of light counters traditional assumptions in Western philosophical thought that light is 'an invisible medium that opens up a knowable world' (Vasseleu, 1998, p.1). As Vasseleu attests, 'in its texture light has a corporeality which constitutes the dawning of the field of vision' (1998, p.13). Or as Nigel Stewart puts it, 'the medium of light makes visible the medium of touch to reveal the body as tactile, and the medium of touch makes tactile the visible quality of light' (2016, p.61).

Light displays a similar kind of haptic presence in *Aurora,* where the tactility of the installation begins with the audience sloshing through puddles of water and encountering blocks of slowly melting ice. Light makes this ice shimmer and glow, and the textured shadows cast lend a heightened sense of

materiality to the rivulets of water that run off the ice. As with the shimmering of the light on the cords in *Plexus,* the other-worldly glow of the light on the ice blocks in *Aurora* seems to suggest a kind of vitality to the light, or what Robert Edmond Jones calls the 'overwhelming sense of the livingness of the light' (Jones, 2004, p.36). The examples cited here certainly attest that in performance, there is a dynamism or an unpredictability to the light that emerges.

In this vein, attending to the relationships between light, bodies and spaces in the layered context of performance can reveal a great deal about the complexities of the material experience of live performance, in terms of both the ways performance is composed and, crucially, the meanings and associations it stimulates in its audience. Light is both a medium in which the performance happens and a material of that performance. As the pioneering lighting designer Jean Rosenthal evocatively put it: 'Dancers live in light as fish live in water. The stage space in which they move is their aquarium, their portion of the sea' (in Rosenthal and Wertenbaker, 1972, p.117; see also Carter in this volume, p.XX) Rosenthal's metaphor is an apposite one, as it speaks to qualities of immersion in light, to the notion that light is something we are *in*, a medium. Crucially, this medium is a tactile one; just as limbs move and feel differently when held in a body of water, to be in light is a sensory as well as visual experience. More recently, Nick Moran has extended Rosenthal's metaphor to think about light in performance contexts beyond dance, stating that 'light is the water the production swims in' and that light 'on stage rarely works alone, and it is part of the thing that it supports – this *water* is inside the production as well as all around it' (Moran, 2017, p.169 and 170). This is the dual sense in which light is an element of performance: it is a component of a larger manifold, and it is also something elemental in the way that air or water might be.

Mercurial light

Invisible Flock's *Aurora* used the mutability of light as a substance in order to invite a reimagining of our relationship with water. For the artists, the piece was borne out of an understanding of the significance of water as a precious commodity, a life-giving substance revealing global inequalities as regards access and security and the installation was about trying to 'turn it into something precious, like a jewel, to create a beautiful hypnotic experience that brings us closer to water and allows us to interact with this substance that we take for granted with a newfound sense of wonder' (Eaton, 2018, p.1). The piece invited this 'hypnotic experience' by allowing its audience

to move through the space that was once an active reservoir, the darkened space seeming to prompt a hushed kind of reverie. In this space, minimal light illuminated glowing blocks of ice, or reflected off the surface of the water, making the material all around us twinkle and glow in ever-changing ways. Using light and dark in this way to treat water as an object of contemplation is perhaps a very direct example of the 'making special' that Ellen Dissanayake identifies as at the core of aesthetic behaviour (1995). By casting the space of the Toxteth reservoir, melting ice, shimmering pools of water and shafts of light as its principal performers, *Aurora* explores the significance of water through aesthetic experience.

Here, the mutability of light partners with the shifting status of water, which we encounter in its various states of solid blocks of ice; as pools, drips, and streams of liquid water; and as haze or vapour in the air. Similarly, Azusa Ono's lighting design includes multiple textures and qualities of light. The laser beams that outline the path around the edges of the space are vividly coloured, and sharply defined by the haze in the air that makes them appear thick and solid. Later, more of these beams will pierce through the space, refracting through blocks of ice and multiplying in their reflections on the water. Blocks of ice illuminate from within, alternately appearing and disappearing as the lights within them fade in and out. We catch glimpses of the architecture of the reservoir as pillars are silhouetted by shafts of light across the space, or lit up in an other-worldly green. At one point a soft amber light highlights the textured surface of the brickwork in a recess beyond the pathway. It then begins to rain in this space, the cascading water caught by a pale light that makes it seem textural. The action of the sudden rain is arresting, an affective gesture that seems to work on me as a spectator in a way beyond associations of rainfall. This is what Hann describes as a 'scenographic scene' that is 'the felt experience of *being with* an affective atmosphere and its othering potential' (2019, p.27). The shifting qualities of the light in this installation afford a kind of openness to the atmospheres created, an attentiveness to the aesthetic events that operate as both a spectacle and as a means of triggering imaginative associations that link to arguments about the value of water central to the politics of the work.

The performance of the light here is one that operates through continual transformation. The mutability at play in *Aurora* unfolds materially at the juncture between the shifting states of water and the protean phenomenon of crafted light. This enfolding of light and what is lit recalls what Bolt describes as the conceptual shift from shedding light on the matter to shedding light for the matter. Shedding light for (the) matter, she argues, 'involves both an ecological and ethical challenge and presents a different conception of visual practice and visual aesthetics. Practice becomes imbricated in culture as an alternative mode of representation' (2004, p.147). This she links to methexis,

or concurrent actual production, arguing that to 'think *methektically* is to think quite differently about the potential of visual practices. It involves thinking through matter' (2004, p.147). *Aurora* provides an invitation to think through the matter – and the mattering – of water, and this happens through the aesthetic transformation of water, ice and light.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that scenographic light is not only a significant interlocutor in performance but also that it may be a paradigmatic mode of understanding what is at stake in the aesthetic offer of performance. As such, this chapter presented an expanded understanding of light in performance, that also enables a fuller view of the aesthetic operation of performance more generally. Light is a medium through which we come to see performance, and a constructive material that co-constitutes the appearing of what is seen. This is not a neutral facilitative process, but a transformative one in which light is imbricated into acts of seeing. Light, in performance, is not simply that which allows vision to take place but, through its construction and instability, is always already a form of mediation. Bleeker discusses the complexity of vision in the theatre, demonstrating that 'what seems to be just "there to be seen" is, in fact rerouted through memory and fantasy, caught up in threads of the unconscious and entangled with the passions' (2008, p.2). While Bleeker's argument does not take light explicitly into account, the examples drawn on here make it readily apparent that light adds a further layer of entanglement to the complex visuality of performance.

Through its scenographic framework, this chapter set out to explore what is at stake in how light performs, to tease out what light might offer to performance as a material, to think through the experience(s) it might invite and how we might trace the interactions between and the relationships that light has with everything else. As Kathleen Irwin argues, 'how performances materialize onstage and how they make sense are two inseparable aspects of thinking through matter' (Irwin, in McKinney and Palmer, 2017, p.126). Thinking through the matter of light reveals a productive complexity in scenographic practice and reception. Exploring how the light operates in the three performances discussed here, this chapter has attended to both the modes of embodied engagement occasioned by light and the ways that it trades on associations or expressive atmospheres. What emerges is an understanding of scenographic light as an ontologically complex phenomenon, an ephemeral material offering challenges to tangibility and perceptual stability. As such, examining the aesthetic operation of light in performance is to move beyond

its decorative value and to engage with its multiple ways of constructing dramaturgical and experiential meaning. Light, I argue, is especially valuable in exploring the nature of performance aesthetics, in unpicking the role of objects, materials and spaces, as critically embedded in the meaning-making processes of performance.