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“Creating emotional climate”: light, temporality and audience experience.

This paper will consider the temporal qualities of theatrical light and darkness drawing on examples of light installation and contemporary relational performance practice staged in environments where audiences share the same space as the performers. It emerges from recent writing in [Contemporary Performance Lighting](#) (Graham, Palmer & Zezulka, 2023).

Light’s profound psychological and physiological effect on human bodies conditions our entire experience of the world and the way in which we think and feel (de Kort and Vetch, 2014). Light and its temporal qualities are therefore an essential but largely overlooked component of all experiences of performance.

We see through light, we witness the effects of light, and we feel light - yet light is, paradoxically, an immaterial material; its materiality is only obtained by proxy, through coming into contact with another material object and even though its qualities are ever-changing, light rarely draws attention to itself in performance; “Lights work subliminally on our feelings. They are one of the theatre’s strongest weapons to create emotional climate.” (Holmberg 1996, p.127)

Light’s materiality is inherently bound to the spatial and temporal conditions in which it is employed but it is rarely considered as a distinct phenomenon. This presentation will focus on the way in which qualities of light deliberately interrupt the experience of contemporary relational performance work such as Fix & Foxy’s *Ungdom* (2015) and Punchdrunk’s *The Burnt City* (2022) where the temporal nature of light and darkness is envisaged as a fundamental component of the designed audience experience.

De Kort, Y. and Veitch, J. 2014. ‘From Blind Spot into the Spotlight: Introduction to the Special issue “Light, Lighting and Human Behaviour”’ *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 39, pp1-4.

Graham, K. Palmer, S. & Zezulka, K. 2023. *Contemporary Performance Lighting: Experience, Creativity and Meaning*, London. Bloomsbury Methuen.

Holmberg, A. 1996. *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Dr Scott Palmer is Associate Professor in Performance Design in the School of Performance & Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds, UK. His teaching and research focus on new ways of thinking about light as a creative performance practice and designing environments for audience experience including those mediated through the mobile phone, interactive video and 360 fulldome environments. Publications include the monograph *Light: Readings in Theatre Practice* (2013), *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* co-edited with Dr Joslin McKinney (2017) and the new anthology *Contemporary Performance Lighting: Experience, Creativity and Meaning* in collaboration with Katherine Graham and Kelli Zezulka (2023). He is Associate Editor of the Routledge *Theatre and Performance Design Journal* and co-editor of Bloomsbury's Performance + Design book series.

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