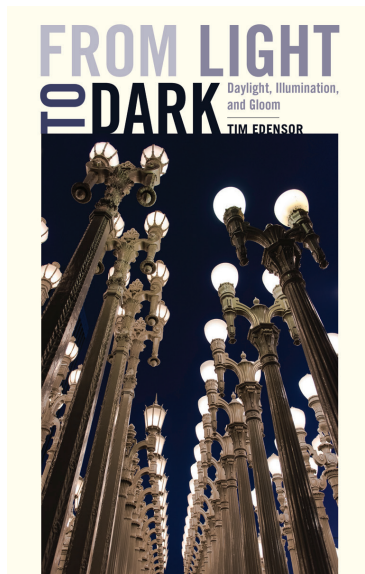


From Light to Dark: Daylight, Illumination, and Gloom

Tim Edensor. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. xiv and 240 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 paper (ISBN 9780816694433); \$100.00 cloth (ISBN 9780816694426).

*Reviewed by Bradley L. Garrett,
Department of Geosciences,
University of Sydney,
Camperdown, New South
Wales, Australia.*



As a photographer, I spend more time than most people thinking about light. I spend hours waiting for luminescence to stretch across a carefully chosen viewshed, or for shadows to render negative space inky in part of my frame to lend depth. I am acutely aware that what I see when I am making an image, the textures, the temperature, the vibrancy, the hue—all those Photoshop sliders—is a product of a sensibility that neither begins nor ends with me. In *From Light to Dark: Daylight, Illumination, and Gloom*, Tim Edensor brings these issues to the fore in the first monograph on the geographies of light and dark. In doing so, he chalks the corners of a new disciplinary encampment that we are sure to see fill out in upcoming years.

From Light to Dark is many things. At times, thick description—either ethnographic or autoethnographic—immerses the reader in poetic drifts through both urban and rural landscapes that would be at home in *Granta Magazine*. In other places, rigorously researched historical narratives ping the imagination—such as where Edensor describes times before street lighting when people took to “making notches in surfaces by which to identify points on

the journey” (p. 167). In other parts of the book, phenomenological accounts, bolstered by references to recent physiological and sensorial science, triggers introspection as the reader ponders how and why we see in the way we do and to what degree environmental and biological necessity shapes our perception. Finally, theoretical strands of the book weave nonrepresentational, affective, and atmospheric accounts through punchy and iterative gradations of illumination. For those familiar with Edensor’s work, the sprawling structure will come as no surprise, for he has always been both a restless scholar and a theoretical pluralist, although at times it does leave one with a sense that the book does not hinge on a central argument, nor does it sit

with any empirical material for long. What Edensor offers here is not a holistic package that answers any specific research questions, but rather an entrée from which future research trajectories will be born.

If there is a philosophical acme, it lies in the “staging atmospheres” section (pp. 139–64), where Edensor challenges deployments of affect as “transpersonal or prepersonal intensities” (à la Massumi 2002) that create “an unfortunate binary understanding of affect and emotion in which each is conceived as a discrete condition” (p. 142). What Edensor wants to argue for instead is a sense of atmosphere being formed through affective engineering, anticipation, and emotional engagement where cumulative social, historical, and physiological processes defy “mute attunement” (p. 139) or “passive entanglement” (p. 160) with affective atmospheres. This argument for coconstituted affect refuses to comprehend actants as affectual “victims” and was the only point I found myself reading and processing in fits and starts to work through the arguments carefully.

In the end, Edensor made a convincing argument but could have pushed it further. Although he returns in every section to issues of public and private space in some way, the politics of coconstituted atmospheres of light are limited in the text to experiences that are offered to the public—such as when citizens are invited to interact with or take control of artistic illuminations. Yet I found myself thinking of installations like “Jerkin the Gerkin” by culturalhijack (2013), where artists in London used a light projection to “massage” the iconic bank building at 30 St Mary Axe, making a clear statement about how tax money was being “spunked” by the City of London. What, I wondered, of the sticky LED gel “throwies” that people use to pepper aesthetically dull buildings, turning them into rainbow-splattered surfaces for a night? What of The Illuminator, the Occupy Wall Street–spawned art collective that uses light, holograms, and augmented reality to make political statements? What of the Burning Man Festival, where organizers’ expectations literally go up in flames in the middle of the desert, to great celebration, and about which reams have been written by anthropologists? Edensor’s message about the coproduction and coconstitution of affective atmospheres of illumination would have been bolstered by venturing into what Mould (2015) called “urban subversions.” Further, in working through “light painting” as graffiti, seen by most as a nondestructive medium, there was a great opportunity to think about how artists and activists are veering through legal loopholes, making effective political statements through illumination at a time when many cities are clamping down on activism of all sorts in both public and private space. Tackling subversive illuminations in an additional chapter would have, I think, brought a deeper political component to the coconstitution of affect, in the way that Dekeyser’s (2015) recent work has done for subvertising practices where outdoor advertising, including LED screens, are destabilized through creative intervention.

Edensor is careful to frame the book as moving *from* light to dark, sidestepping the obvious snare of framing the book through a binary. Yet I also could not stop thinking about how the binary between light and dark can also be seen as coconstitutive. Like the philosophical dilemma of whether a hole can exist on its own or must be in or through something else to exist, or conversely whether holes do not exist because they are merely perforated objects, we find that in either case a hole and its context are inseparable. Equally with light and dark, is darkness a natural state mediated by light, is light, being essential to life, consciousness, and perception to be seen as the primary in the binary? Or are both coconstituted equally

depending on your perspective? Toward the end of the book, Edensor writes that “light and dark are never discrete, singular conditions but characterized by multiple levels and, moreover, need each other to be most effective” (p. 217), edging toward a coconstitutive spatial philosophy of illumination, but then he falls back into social and cultural accounts and expectations rather than pushing the argument into *terra ignota*.

For a book that strategically eschews obvious binaries, the rendering of vibrant images in black and white is the book’s Achilles’ heel. Whoever at the University of Minnesota Press thought this was a necessary concession to keep the price down was wrong and have done the monograph a disservice, as I found myself almost constantly searching the Internet for color images of the artworks and places described to get a better sense of them, often breaking the story’s spell. Color images (and more of them) would not just have made the book purr, they also would have reinforced the arguments contained within. Some of the most compelling sections of the book were related to the phenomenology of light: the physiological descriptions of how cones in the eye allow for the “experience of a color spectrum” (p. 4), where rods “allow human vision to gradually adjust to gloomier environments, usually after about twenty minutes, making the eyes more sensitive to light, shape, and movement, though impairing the ability to distinguish color” (p. 191). What a shame my cones were not exercised while reading.

Pedantic and prejudiced criticisms aside, *From Light to Dark* moves through a dizzying number of artworks and places with directed fluidity. The lyrical components of the book are so immersive that section and chapter breaks sear. Edensor clearly could have written a different version of this book that would have been a pocket-sized poetic manifesto on illumination that would have been placed on the shelf between Matthew Beaumont on nightwalking and Robert Macfarlane on landscape. I desperately hope Edensor writes this companion volume one day because his style sings in the vignettes. Placed as they are, often at the beginning of sections, they act as effective hooks to bring into focus a clear sense of how light and dark shape our sense of place, from the street to the home and from the paraffin lamp to the LED bulb. Small details, such as how people broke early electric lamps in the way people smash CCTV cameras now (seeing them as oppressive symbols of authoritarian power), or how switching from candles to lamps in sacred spaces profoundly reconstitutes our sense of place, left my brain whirring for days.

In the way all good research does, *From Light to Dark* also helped me see the blind spots in my own research. In an

article I wrote last year about the embodied aesthetics of London's sewer system, I depicted an 1862 scene where the engineer of the sewer system, Joseph Bazalgette, lit a newly completed tunnel with hundreds of lamps and invited luminaries and journalists to behold the feat of engineering, where the light flickered against the red brickwork, before opening the floodgate of excrement still in use today. I wrote that the lamps were "placed strategically in the archways to . . . overload the senses [but also] transformed visitors into dim shadowy figures . . . conjuring predictable spectres of the underground" (Garrett 2016, 12). With Edensor's treatise in hand, I now of course imagine reframing the paper through it and know it would have been stronger for it.

From Light to Dark is undoubtedly a foundational geographic text. Part treatise and part travelogue, it will have the reader at one moment lost in unfolding stories traversing dozens of art installations, through fascinating places and into cultural events across multiple countries, and in

the next bounding to chase down interesting references, leading to the interdisciplinary intellectual rabbit holes we all love to get lost in. *From Light to Dark* will, in time, prove to be one of those books that must be consulted during any project related to art, landscape, and place because applying the lens of darkness and illumination will inevitably reveal what is hiding just beyond plain sight.

References

- Dekeyser, T. 2015. Why artists installed 600 fake adverts at COP21. *The Conversation* 7 December 2015. <http://theconversation.com/why-artists-installed-600-fake-adverts-at-cop21-51925> (last accessed 18 April 2017).
- Garrett, B. 2016. Picturing urban subterranea: Embodied aesthetics of London's sewers. *Environment and Planning A* 48(10): 1948–66.
- Massumi, B. 2002. *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mould, O. 2015. *Urban subversion and the creative city*, London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge.