

Cities across the world are increasingly losing their darkness and have witnessed the proliferation and contestation of illumination as a strategy for shaping and controlling the urban landscape and the experience of *cityness*. This is especially the case in cities of the global south where participation, belonging, safety and identity are mediated through illumination. This paper draws upon the experience of the South African city of Cape Town to explore illumination across a range of temporal and spatial contexts including: histories of illumination in the city, lighting and the discourse of safety, the aesthetics of lighting and creation of spectacle, illumination and the destruction of night, and contestation of lighting and responses to the elimination of darkness. The discussion will demonstrate that the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'city-that-never-sleeps' relies on vast infrastructures of illumination that have influence on both agency and affect: enabling or limiting mobility and underscoring surveillance while producing a wide range of urbanities that function because- or in absence of illumination.

## **Introduction**

Light—and the more broadly-stated concept of illumination—is part of our everyday experience and rhythms. Light is not simply the absence of darkness; rather it is a necessity for modern urban life; an enabler to the 24-hour 'city-that-never-sleeps'; and tool that may be engaged in the formation of social and material practices. While the natural cycles of daylight and darkness used to govern the human experience of space and place in Africa as elsewhere, artificial illumination by way of electric lighting has, since its inception in the late Nineteenth century in South Africa<sup>1</sup> altered the movements and flows of humanity. Illumination creates new spaces and places and underpins an alternate way of understanding humans' relationship with our lived experience of the landscape that Bille and Sorensen (2007) call the 'lightscape'.

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<sup>1</sup> The diamond-rush city of Kimberley, in South Africa's present-day Northern Cape Province, was the first city in Africa—and in fact in the entire Southern Hemisphere—to install electric street lighting, in 1882. Kimberley had electric street lighting before London (City of Kimberley 2013).

### *Light and the modern city*

Although rural electrification—and thus illumination—still lags behind its urban counterpart in much of the world, my focus here is on the city, and the influence that illumination has on both human agency and affect in the city. As Edensor (2011) reminds us, '[t]he lighting of modern cities has transformed nocturnal urban experience, widespread artificial illumination producing cityscapes of regulation, hierarchical selectiveness, consumption, fantasy and imagination' (2011: 230). Since its widespread inception within cities during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, artificial lighting has been used for a number of purposes that have themselves contributed to modern urban life. Among them,

*...artificial lighting since then has been utilised to enhance safety and mobility, facilitate surveillance, foster domestic intimacy and style, broadcast commercial advertising, fashion signposting, selectively highlight buildings to reinforce state and corporate power, promote festivity, and generally expand the uses of the city at night. (Edensor 2012: 1106)*

Illumination is both an element of infrastructure and an influence on our experience of space—urban and otherwise. The luminosity of space, following Bille and Sorensen (2007) acts as a 'powerful social agent in its relationship with people, things, colours, shininess and places' and further '...may facilitate an appreciation of the active social role of luminosity in the practice of day-to-day activities (Billen and Sorensen 2007: 263). At the same time it is part of the mundane and the spectacular experiences of the city. As such, illumination is tightly-bound to the experience of *cityness*. Cityness refers to the urban form as a process, what Simone (2010) calls "a thing in the making" (2010: 3). Cityness underscores the "unique capacity [of urban space] to provoke relations of all kinds" (Simone 2010: 3) and the combination of ingredients that make a city what it is. Illumination, I argue, is a critical aspect of cityness, in that it speaks to the influence of light on our mobility within urban space, and movements, as Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) refer, that are "...not the simple traversal of space, the act of going from here to there, but the negotiation of several disparate sites and zones, in which they may behave in different ways" (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 370).

As both a mundane and spectacular influence on the experience of the city, the power of illumination can be understood through the ways it influences both agency and affect of urban dwellers. Illumination moderates both the movements through urban space, as well as the behaviours that are produced and enacted within in them. More than simply a tool and outcome of developmental efforts, illumination is a key aspect of our modern human existence. In countries of the Global South, such as South Africa, illumination is progress. It signals a leap into modernity, and access to technology, mobility, and a better way of life. Though one of the leading economies in Africa, and the pioneer in electrified street lighting on the continent, South Africa still lags behind its Northern counterparts with regard to access to electricity, and thus illumination. With only a brief glance at a recently produced composite map of the world at night from the Suomi NPP satellite (NASA 2013), Africa indeed appears to merit its nickname of the 'dark continent'. The map not only reveals the extent of illumination on the planet, but also hints toward the influence that illumination may have our experience of the world in which we live.

#### *Illumination: Mundane aspects*

At its most unremarkable level, illumination forms part of our urban infrastructure. Through its relationship with the production, transmission and metering of commercial and domestic electricity, illumination relies on the static fixity of the power generation and distribution network while it creates luminosity that produces ephemeral shadows and shifting contrasts between lightness and dark. With a supply of electric power, illumination is brought to the city through the lighting infrastructure for streets, buildings, transportation systems, our places of work and our dwellings.

When the infrastructure is available and operating normally, one tends to take it for granted. When it is not available, and when power cuts—frequent in countries such as South Africa—interrupt the illuminated city, its role in governing everyday movements and the social and material production of urban space becomes quickly apparent.

### *Illumination: Spectacular aspects*

Lighting and luminosity is used to surpass everyday experiences. Lighting not only alters the materiality of space, but it is also used in an aesthetic sense for the creation of spectacle. Piercing the mundane, illumination can be harnessed to shape space into something beyond the ordinary, and can propel the temporality of city life from an experience moderated through darkness and light to one where the '24 hour city' becomes a new concept in placemaking (Cochrane 2004). Such cases of illumination-as-spectacle, can be readily observed as the ostentatious display of festive illumination during the Christmas season (Edensor and Millington 2009), or the use of extraordinary displays of light and illumination to counteract the crisis of public space in modern urban life (Alves, 2007). Alves (2007) focus on a once vibrant urban quarter in Lisbon demonstrates how light may provide an effective tool in the creation of cultural events that 'may energize cities' nocturnal lives' (Alves 2007: 1252). In this way, light-as-spectacle is not simply a strategy for the temporary transformation of urban space, but may also serve as a way to inject new life into the experience of cityness and the sensations that result from taking part in urban life.

### *Illumination and agency*

Light, it is argued, forms a critical link in the relationship between sensation and matter (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 264). The illumination of 'things' are thus part of the 'intimate human inhabitation and experience of the world' (264). The sociality of light has cultural dimensions and is firmly-linked to identity. As Bille and Sorensen (2007) further argue:

*...light is used to reveal people, places and things in culturally specific ways. Light is shed for – and not just on – the material environment...It is in one way or the other used in social life as a way of reflecting notions of identity, cultural heritage, morality, securing possessions, and revealing or concealing particular aspects of social life and so on. (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 266)*

Light is an essential element of our human experience of self and surroundings. As Davey (2004) notes, '[i]t is through light that we mainly experience the sensations of our bodies in space. (2004: 46). But light, itself

has agency, in its ability to orchestrate daily life (Bille and Sorensen 2007). However, it is through the absence of light, and the mystery of shadows where humans experience the affective dimension of illumination.

### *Illumination and affect*

Typically associated with emotional responses such as happiness and fear, 'affect' is not synonymous with emotion (Thrift 2004). Rather, affect is a dialogue that the subject has with the object: in our case the dialogue between city-goers and the space(s) he/she encounters. Thrift (2004) provides useful context when he conceives of affect as "...a set of embodied practices that produce visible conduct as an outer lining" (2004: 60). The emotional response of the subject, in turn, acts to shape the space into a specific 'place'—shifting the empty vessel which is space, full of potential into a place that is inscribed with meaning, memories, and ideas (Creswell 2004). It is through affect that we connect with the urban landscape rather than simply remaining detached above it.

Through affective responses of fear or comfort, for example, the experience of the city changes as participation, belonging, safety and identity are mediated through illumination. The degree of illumination in urban space, and the extent to which light plays off the built and natural environment to form shadows, can instil feelings of fear while having effects on safety, and mobility.

### **The city of Cape Town**

In the city of Cape Town, where municipal electricity has been available to at least a portion of the populace since 1891<sup>2</sup> (City of Cape Town 2013), the role of light is apparent in terms of both agency and affect through mundane and spectacular examples. While the town of Kimberley may have propelled South Africa to the forefront of urban lighting, it is important to note that, more than 130 years since the streetlights first glowed in Kimberley, many urban residents of South Africa still struggle for access to municipal services—

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<sup>2</sup> During that year, two private installations of electric lights were completed, while the first electrically-lit street light in the Cape Peninsula is erected at Rondebosch Fountain.

including electricity, clean water, and adequate sanitation—the provision of which by local government is enshrined in the Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Like other cities, Cape Town relies on vast infrastructures of illumination that have transformed nocturnal experience to enhance safety and mobility, enable surveillance, promote economic activities and a sense of belonging, and highlight the natural beauty of the city at night. Examples from the city of Cape Town include the mundane, the spectacular, as well as those that demonstrate the affective role of illumination and the agency that illumination provides to connect the sensation of light and the matter of the city.

[This case study is still in-process and results are pending. Full results will be delivered with the final paper]

#### *Uncertainty of the mundane*

Load shedding and the interruption of normality. The absence of lighting during periods of load shedding produces concerns of insecurity throughout communities throughout the city, as darkness enables a wide range of urbanities that function because- or in absence of illumination.

#### *The spectacle*

1. Lighting the mountain
2. Adderley Street Christmas lights

#### *Affect and agency*

Crime prevention and community building through the VPUU—Khayelitsha

#### *Conclusions*

Lighting and the medication of participation, belonging, safety and identity

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