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The Function Of The Gaze For The Structuring Of Space



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On Wednesday night, as they did every Wednesday, the parents went to the movies. The boys, lords and masters of the house, closed the doors and windows and broke the glowing bulb in one of the living room lamps. A jet of golden light as cool as water began to pour out of the broken bulb, and they let it run to a depth of almost three feet. Then they turned off the electricity, took out the rowboat, and navigated at will among the islands in the house.

This fabulous adventure was the result of a frivolous remark I made while taking part in a seminar on the poetry of household objects. Totó asked me why the light went on with just the touch of a switch, and I did not have the courage to think about it twice. "Light is like water," I answered, "You turn the tap and out it comes."

Light is like water. Gabriel García Márquez

Light is a difficult medium to explain. As theatre lighting designer extraordinaire Jennifer Tipton put it, "light doesn't exist until it hits something, so the something that it hits is always perceived first, more strongly and more clearly than the light that is revealing it." The scenery in a stage production marks the boundary of the space, but light fills the volume of that space, giving the performers a landscape in which to exist. According to Tipton, preparing to light a piece, "creating a luminous plot," is like creating a new language: the language of that particular production of the performance. "This language must be able to express with nuance the multiple levels and contexts of the production. It must be able to allude to the social, political, personal and psychological layers that also come to exist within the world of production; as the world where the production and the audience meet, without being literal or mundane." There is a lot to be learnt from the paradigm of the stage set, it reflects the actual theatricalization of our life.

Theatre has long been recognized as a space of embodiment, presence and reciprocity. Like the psychoanalyst's office, the theatre is a potential space of signification. In other words, it has the ability to help us understand, to see within ourselves, and to capture the light of the world in which we live. It is in terms of transitions from one psychic scene to another—repetition, remembering, and elaboration—that psychic processes are conceived; this is a primary function of psychic life: to create representations which allow states of "figurability" to illuminate and give expression to what, until then, had remained obscure, in order to be integrated within our representational networks. On the other hand, our play with the mirror image of theatre exposes our sense of loss and disjunction in relation to the ways in which we exist—it succeeds in disorganizing our field of perception, showing us something other than what we want to see. For these reasons, the procedure of theatricality itself deserves our consideration, particularly the technical process of lighting a scene and working with shadows.



Ellen Ruge - Lighting Designer (Stockholm).
 Born in Oslo, Norway, Ruge has been living in Stockholm since 1982. She has created light for a great number of stage productions in opera, dance, and drama.

She has been working for many years with the same directors and choreographers in teams, among them choreographer Mats Ek at Opera Garnier- Paris, Bayerische Staatballet, The Hamburg-ballett, The Grand Theatre National Opera i Warsaw, Deutscher Oper am Rein- Dusseldorf, Nederlands dans theater – Den Haag, Teatro del Argentina – Rome, Ballet Ramberg, UK and the Cullberg-ballet, SE. and Director Eirik Stubö at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM).

In the ordinary sense, to gaze is not simply seeing or pure perception. Rather, in one way or another, gazing is the act of being engaged in one's own vision, by will, interest, desire. Seeing something and adequately grasping what is seen with the gaze are two different things. For the psychoanalyst, unlike the eye doctor, seeing is not seeing a thing, but an image. In a similar way to what happens with a painting, in which light is present even if it is not seen—the painting confirms this transformation of vision into gaze. The gaze as object is a proposition that French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan put forward, a brilliant discovery. But where is the gaze located? Lacan tells us that it is in the field of the Other, the place from which I am seen.

To account for the development of our visual system, we are obliged to consider the gaze of the Other—there has to be a certain "being seen" by the subject for it to work. However, the quest for recognition, the desire for the Other to mirror us as we would see ourselves, is grounded in that impossibility. In the dialectic between the eye and the gaze, from the first glance we see that there is no coincidence between the two, but fundamentally an illusion—you never look at me where I see you, and conversely, what I look at is never quite what I want to see. Our gaze is our most unique trait; it refers us to our own fascination of this world which looks at us from everywhere. To gaze is to enjoy seeing and what you see. It is the procurement of space carried out by the gaze. For this event I will be joined in conversation by the lighting designer Ellen Ruge.