

A Personal Aesthetic, Lighting in Art – the Art in Light by A. Paul Davies

My background is as a lighting enthusiast who started working, while a student in an entirely different area, with known rock bands. With time I saw theatre as a subtler and more interesting challenge and moved my emphasis to theatre lighting. When I completed my undergraduate degree I decided to make my hobby a job and worked in small-scale theatre / cabaret and touring. Most recently I worked for a large and highly respected opera company touring large theatres in England. My aims now are to move from the small scale where one does everything as a technician / manager / designer, to specialising on lighting design – which I see as my creative art. The MFA is partly about the refining of my aesthetic vision. This paper intends to explain my process and some conclusions.

I wish here to set out my aesthetic and because my profession as a lighting designer is about sharing that aesthetic, I will contemplate how light in theatre is perceived by others. Lighting is one of the major loves of my life and so my philosophy on life affects my aesthetic, or one could put it that this aesthetic affects my life.

I am a believer in making art more than just entertainment, ideally with a message and purpose, it can excite, educate, challenge and stimulate emotions. My aesthetic contributes to good and interesting art.

A. Lighting Design:

I consider the creative process to be very important in the final product in that I believe it influences the final feel of the any show. The converse is a belief that only results count, one cannot measure what is not created but I would contend that approaches based on formulas (such classroom lighting) need other inputs of artistic flair to be good art. It is perfectly possible to use McCandless methods faithfully, decide on safe colours such as R33ⁱ and just produce cues at the ends of scenes, but one is not adding to the production significantly. Art for me is about pushing the boundaries, challenging, exploring and being larger than life.

So how do we create this art? The two ways into lighting design are most commonly in the US by training (BFA/MFA/Union Exam) and in the UK with minimal training coming up through the ranks (Apprenticing and two years maximum training, sector acceptance). Technology is so much a part of what we do that the access to technology shapes how one learns, we are lucky here at CCM to have some (if not all) of the technology available in the professional world. It depends upon the individual but I feel it is not easy to step up scales without mentoring of quality and opportunities to experiment. I would contend that how one learns is one factor that shapes ones aesthetic.

By “codify” the process efficiently I suspect that there is too much theorising in many North American academic departments which can produce too many rules, yet a free form approach can be frustrating for those not used to itⁱⁱ. The big advantage of the North American system is that it values design and designers over craft, so one gets a carefully shaped looks for each piece. In Britain lighting designers are battling to ensure they are

not dismissed as a part time chief electrician and rather than artists. I believe there is a happy medium, which will enable great art to be developed.

One needs to find a balance between experience and education; 15 years of practical lighting and this MFA in my case. Each individual develops a process of working out which of the conventional rules work for ones aesthetic, which do not and which need modifying. One then develops some of one's own, and then one ignores any of them at one's peril. An aesthetic cannot be a static thing, it has to keep developing throughout ones education and career.

As Philip Gabriel, a renowned architectural designer, says about lighting design "successful lighting designers have a good understanding of the other disciplines. To perform their task successfully, the group must meld science and aesthetics."ⁱⁱⁱ

For me the distinction between the Craftsman and the Designer is only in the planning, vision, execution, appropriateness and quality of that art. Designers should ensure that the art is good and appropriate, not just reproducing (what may be good) designs. Many craftsmen when molding their product to a certain setting, become designers. Every production is different, and so unsupervised crafts people become artists. The bottom line is found in producing aesthetically pleasing product.

Above I alluded to the fact that I feel the means and the ends in theatre are linked. Theatre is a collaborative art and I believe that design for theatre should also be collaborative. One can question how this affects my aesthetic, but I feel that a positive environment is very important for both the creation and the appreciation of art. This atmosphere takes over ones life and if it is full of tension one cannot work effectively for long periods of time. On the other hand some pressure ensures that results are obtained - the need in us all to be creative and please our own, and others, eyes.

Another top architectural lighting designer was asked what is the largest obstacle to the lighting designer?

"Ego. Being open-minded with no predetermined notions is so important. I think lighting people have a tendency to follow simplistic lighting criteria, metrics and jargon too frequently. You must start from ground zero with every project. I never presume to know how to do anything. Many designers look at a project type and fall into the stereotype of that type of project."^{iv}

From this I state further that one learns from working with good artists. When one has built a relationship with that artist one can appreciate how they perceive their art and gain further insights. Projects are all different and there needs to be adaptation. By being open minded one allows ones methods to develop, be broad, and to be exciting to yourself and to others. Individual projects may develop, with the lighting concept not being immediately obvious. This is what David Hayes calls "a combination of perceptions and choices"^v from within one and within the team.

In quoting architectural lighting designers above I am acknowledging that lighting design is a broader field than just theatre. One can learn from the other fields where the methods

and outcomes may be affected by different factors (I should say subtly different but there are both subtle and outrageous things in rock lighting from which we can learn many things). By bringing the skills from other sectors, working in these sectors, using diverse equipment etc. we challenge and shape what we think is acceptable, and ultimately that of the audience. I feel the challenges of other aesthetics and technologies if carefully used will make me a better designer.

The area we can always learn from is nature.

B. Natures lighting / Natural lighting

I personally fall into the group of people who believe that nature inspires art, and that we cannot approach recreating nature. The greatest lighting I have ever seen was at 6am walking through the jungle in Zambia to see Victoria Falls, with rainbows in the mist as dawn broke over the ravine.

Many of my favourite paintings are the Dutch and English landscape paintings, and the Dutch scenes. The landscape paintings show soft light and shadow with great detail and care. The still life's and scenes are wonderful studies of how light reflects, reveals, gives form, highlights and frames a view. They take nature's light and show it in a way we can all understand and appreciate. This depiction of nature's lighting makes the 2D painting look alive, this is how I feel natural lighting in theatre also has to be. If a show I work on were to be compared to a Constable or Vermeer painting I would know that I, and my colleagues, had achieved close to perfection. These paintings though are excellent inspired depictions of nature.

We can learn from nature, try to emulate it, but never match it. By being assertive with ones lighting one can produce a facsimile of nature that is pleasing, adds to the dramatic production and may be considered, by some, to be greater in beauty than some of natures scenes.

C. Light levels, colour, depth timing perceptions in creators and the audience.

Robert Edmond Jones succinctly sums up the effects of light and shadow on the audience by linking the dark with unconscious. He reminds us of how as children we are afraid of the dark, how in power cuts we seek to escape, and that the mood changes with light changes – most notably with the dimming of the house lights^{vi}. As one can see from my comments on Nature above I feel it is not possible for us to recreate an accurately natural lighting look with theatre lighting as a tool. Undoubtedly colour effects emotions and even physiology^{vii} and we can help recreate many different feelings.

Eyes vary and it is impossible to measure how sensitive all audience members are. One can though train the audience a little to accept a certain light level as normal and they adapt their then pallet to match yours. One can set a light level, contrast and colour / hue standard for an audience in a theatre^{viii}. By creating ones introducing looks carefully one sets conventions that can go well beyond the standard the audience brings with them. For example night is often thought of as dark blue, but one could modify this to include

purples or greens for instance. The audience ideally should develop a way of thinking that is in tune with your design concepts^{ix}. Laurence Olivier in his introduction to Richard Pilbrows original book asserted that light levels in 1970 had to be brighter because ears have been blunted by amplification. I would suggest also that the audiences eyes expect higher light levels due to higher levels of lighting in houses and workplaces, and richer colours because of high standards of colour printing, films and vibrant TV. Equipment nowadays is more efficient, so audiences and directors are used to greater variations of light levels on stage.

One can tune one self to be more aware of lighting; this MFA has encouraged me to keep my eyes open. One can learn to be light sensitive and react to the expectations of the audience, scenery designer and director.

Sadly, the bottom line is that often the audience only comments upon the lighting when it goes wrong. We are mostly producing a subliminal art, which is hard for the general public to judge. Lighting feeds significantly into the overall feeling of the show. We are often the unsung heroes fixing deficiencies in set costume or blocking so we often have to take a personal pride that is not based upon public adoration. Thankfully within the performance world our contributions are much appreciated, and it is in the approval of my fellow artists that I seek to confirm my aesthetic choices. The approval of a director or designer is always much appreciated because they understand the vision. If it is appropriate to a show I feel these are points in favour of bold lighting – the more people who share my passion for lighting the better. Good bold lighting gets us positively noticed.

The timing and composition of light likewise will differ from that of nature. I personally like my fades to be 4 to 10 seconds long and fairly obvious – if not obtrusive. I tend to use a strong key light and gentle fill lighting. Once the audience is used to these conventions any changes in this have more effect.

Philip Gabriel again succinctly states the point in reference to architectural lighting design. “Scientists estimate that 80-90 percent of all our perceptions are made through sight. Since sight is not possible without light, it follows that a lighting designer has an incredible impact on how an (architectural) project is perceived. Lighting should not merely illuminate architecture, it should reinforce the creative concept.”^x

D. My Philosophical Aesthetic

It was suggested that I am a Romantic and Modernist in my thinking about art, and my thinking certainly has some elements of both. For me art is central to my thinking in constructing this aesthetic, in Pre-Romantic theory art just was, and since then its definition has proved troublesome. Nature supplies us with wonderful and beautiful things to inspire us, to be appreciated and even copied – if not always faithfully, but it is not art. Art for me is a human experience^{xi}, it helps to define us as human, and it is separate from beauty^{xii} that can also include nature. I suggest that one cannot write off any art or produce a hierarchy of art that will be acceptable to all. Each individual has to create their own aesthetic based on what they believe is good art. Generally there is

agreement of these individuals on what is quality art. This may be separate from what one likes or does not. Society vests in arts professionals, the media and organisations much of the legitimising power in deciding how to think of art. I personally may not agree with what is being shown but I assume others are interested in it. I have tastes in lighting design which may differ from what I think is great lighting design. I agree with David Hume in that argument and reflection can influence the inner sense of beauty. These statements do not put me with many post modernists who will deny that art exists (because no one shares the same cultural / sexual / aesthetic values'), or with the majority of empiricists who have a distrust of the imagination. I side with Fleming in that art happens and one measures it by asking the "perceiver if the contact has taken place"^{xiii}.

I feel uncomfortable with rigid definitions of art unlike many followers of Kant. I believe that art should be interpreted widely. As Lyas in his Introduction to Aesthetics points out this view leaves the field wide open, and in criticism / education one can only take personal points of view and be honest and courageous rather than judgemental^{xiv}. I would disagree, as I assume would most reading/hearing this, with Tolstoy who believes art is not worth the "labour of millions" because of the sacrifices but also because it is becoming "more vague and uncertain to human perception"^{xv}.

E. Great lighting design, and How I light and interpret for lighting

Below are some examples of great designers who have helped shape my aesthetic. These designers are all people can produce, what is agreed by most who see it, appropriate and good design. The photos are indicators of their work but never give the full feel of the live performance with lights.

Richard Pilbrow –

Richard is a great mentor to myself and hundreds of others. He published what is still one of the best textbooks on lighting in 1970 and recently updated it with autobiographical content and interviews with colleagues. He has codified British lighting design, and lights large shows across the world. His company, Theatre Projects, has employed many of the top designers, has radicalised the shape of theatres worldwide by consulting of auditorium design (at CCM Corbett, The Recital Hall and The Studio were their projects) and helped move theatre technology ahead. Although now semi retired he still occasionally does shows such as Showboat or projects with Sir Peter Hall.



The Magic Flute, Los Angeles Opera Company, LD Richard Pilbrow, Scenery Gerald Scarfe, Director Sir Peter Hall ^{xvi} Picture with the kind permission of Richard.

Richard is certainly a great designer but not one whose design style always fits mine, what I admire most is the way he works, he is very co-operational, calm, jovial, knowledgeable, well prepared (but not inflexible) and gets the job done well. I like Richards's work most when he layers lights to create composite looks that have great texture and depth (see above). Much of the time he does straight dramas, which do not call for such lighting.

Jules Fisher =

Jules has worked on shows that range from the Stones to The Clinton Inaugural. I had the pleasure of working on one of his shows while working at Opera North.

*Originally **Here** there was a picture from Richard Pilbrows Book – See the book for inspiration*

I particularly admire Jules's use of bold large strokes of light. He often will use only one or two 5K lights and carefully fill in the detail beyond the effected area. His use of colour is very clean; he does not mix colours much on stage but carefully chooses appropriate hues. Jules must think very capably in three dimensions because the placing of all his lights is a joy to examine, each angle carefully calculated to ensure that the beam and shadow have significant effect.

Andrew Bridge –

Andy is protégé of Richard Pilbrows, but is now known for his own projects such as Phantom, Sunset Boulevard, Oliver, The Lloyds Building, and concert tours such as Shirley Bassey.

*Originally **Here** there was a picture from Richard Pilbrows Book – See the book for inspiration*

Andy's lighting is exciting and big. He is the master of using many small sources to create a complex and full picture. He is not afraid to leave large areas in shadow and in doing so sharply focus the audiences' attention. He has been successful by hooking up with the right directors and production companies (Cameron Mackintosh for instance) and has developed an enviable client base.

Luc LaFortune –

Luc works primarily for Cirque du Soleil, lighting all their shows. He has almost total control over what he does.

*Originally **Here** there was a picture from Richard Pilbrows Book – See the book for inspiration*

Although traditionally trained, Luc brings an anarchistic approach to the shows. The folklore is that he stands on the stage and just points where he wants the lights; no plot, paperwork, or detailed synopsis come to the show, just lots of artistic intents. Whatever the reality, it is certain that the ends and means are linked. In this case, the lighting is exciting and anarchistic - any traditional rules he breaks with freedom and his looks benefit from this, his looks challenge one and add to the excitement of the production.

David Hersey –

David is an American based in London, and is another who started off working with Richard Pilbrow. He is best known for Cats, Les Miserables, Miss Saigon and Oliver but has a varied portfolio that includes dance and opera. He owns the most influential Gobo design company worldwide. Their designs are used by many including Rosco in the US. He is also an inventor and manufacturer of stage lighting. He will often design a light for a show if he cannot get the effect he requires.

*Originally **Here** there was a picture from Richard Pilbrows Book – See the book for inspiration*

David's trademarks are his gobo use and lighting up of the air with beams of light. The above photo is a typical scene showing careful composition, clear depth, and different tones of light, all within the same general palette.

My Own Style

With a background in rock lighting I am happy to be using strong colours and steep angles. Lighting in rock is all about effect and these elements can generate high emotions on stage. I like to heighten the depth of a stage view by using strong side and cross light, to light elements as they recede in different colours or pick them out by highlighting or ignoring them. I particularly like to silhouette people or set pieces to make statements about relative power or position^{xvii}. I like to use the air as part of my canvas to paint upon. The addition of haze or smoke enhances this so small amounts of this will often be used in my shows to catch the light before it hits the stage.

There are outer margins of acceptable colour and level, which it is interesting to test at times of high or low emotion. I like deep reds, pinks, straws, magentas, purples and deep blues. For many years I tried to steer away from green light but am learning to use it with care when not on peoples faces. With all this deep colour I am a fan of bright lights to ensure one has intensity to make these colours vivid on stage. My favourite lights in our current inventory are the four 5 kilowatt fresnels. Even with these large lights I will use a broad range of intensity on stage, often making use of shadow.

I am in total agreement with Francis Reid who writes the following piece about Brechtian monochromatic lighting

“I cannot claim that this is a production style that engages my sympathy. Whilst not denying the power of the intellect in a debate of ideas, I derive more exciting stimulation from the potential of theatre as a medium for the exploration of emotions. In such a theatre, colour is a powerful tool, particularly when deployed to assist in exerting a subconscious influence on the audience”^{xviii}

I am always aware that this has to be balanced by Richard Pilbrow’s warning that one “use(s) strong colours with only the greatest care, remembering that the first function of lighting is selective visibility”^{xix}. He points out separately that the stark Brechtian feel is best achieved by subtle off whites^{xx}. Of course elsewhere Richard also says, “rules are made to be broken”^{xxi}. From all of this it is obvious that I am a fan of Dance, Opera and Musicals where one can interpret more liberally than straight theatre.



Les Mamelles de Teresias, Patricia Corbett Theatre, LD - Myself, Sets and Costumes – Tricia Thelen, Direction – JoseMaria Condermo

A very relevant question is how do you maintain creativity? For me it is walking around with ones eyes open, questioning what one sees, visiting museums and galleries. One should be watching other LDs at work and their shows. By occasionally challenging oneself with new forms to work in one can evaluate how one is developing. Inspiration comes from the world-class designers one has worked with and the quality education one absorbs formally and informally.

To conclude I believe one has to gain as much knowledge as possible of processes, production, theatre and the audience and their aesthetics, then be bold and exciting. I am of the opinion that lighting can be intrusive if it is appropriate and agreed by all the creative team, particularly the director.

I wish to finish this paper by quoting Robert Edmond Jones again, with the favourite quote of many a lighting designer

“Does this mean that we are to carry images of poetry and vision and high passion in our minds while we are shouting out orders to electricians on ladders in light-rehearsals?

Yes. This is what it means.”^{xxii}

We should let our aesthetic shape all we do.

ⁱ What Rob Hahn, a fellow MFA candidate, dubbed “No thought pink”, a common catch all choice.

ⁱⁱ I think of Tom Umfrids experience in the UK this summer.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.lightforum.com/interviews>

^{iv} Howard Brandston. Also at <http://www.lightforum.com/interviews>

^v David Hayes, p85

^{vi} Robert Edmond Jones, p123-4,

^{vii} An example of this is treating jaundiced babies with blue light.

^{viii} For more detail see Richard H Parmer, chapter 6.

^{ix} David Hays encourages other theatre professionals to also develop such sensitivity. Light on the Subject p.79

^x Gabriel at <http://www.lightforum.com/interviews>

^{xi} I was helped in clarifying my position on this by Bruce E Flemmings book particularly Chapter 7, p144 - 147

^{xii} I have avoided defining Beauty, there is much written. I explored the ideas of Fredrick Turner who contends that it is “central to all meaningful life and achievement, it gives access to an objective reality of the universe and it is culturally universal” p.15

^{xiii} Flemming p143. As to one expanding on to say then that Communication is Art as Juri Lotman or Umberto Eco suggest. Flemming rightly refutes this (p144-145). Communication demands some alteration in the world, a public response (even if it is postponed or hidden), and thus is half of a dyad. Perception of art, by contrast, (need) involves no reaction in the public realm.

^{xiv} Lynas p131.

^{xv} Tolstoy p79.

^{xvi} Colour Leaves in Richard Pilbrows Book 1995,

^{xvii} As You Like It's epilogue for instance.

^{xviii} Francis Reid, p68,

^{xix} Pilbrow, p89,

^{xx} Pilbrow, p89.

^{xxi} Pilbrow, p4.

^{xxii} Jones, Ibid. p128.