

Absence and Unfolding

Approaching a new understanding of the lighting designer's creative process

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In the UK, lighting designers, in common with other theatre designers, often work to standard contracts with employers. One of the central principles of these contracts is that designers are creators of intellectual property, and that they are paid for the use of that intellectual property while retaining ownership of it. Constructing the designers' role as one in which their primary responsibility is to produce intellectual property sets up the idea of *design-as-(abstract)-object*, as opposed to *design-as-process*. In contrast, performers, technicians, managers and other personnel involved in the making of the performance are paid for their time and labour; unlike designers, they are not paid royalties, and they retain no rights over the artistic work that they help to create.

This *design-as-object* conceptual model is constituted not only by the lighting designers' contract - it is also implied by most lighting textbooks. The model suggests that the lighting designer's twofold task is firstly to *create* the design through an act of the imagination (motivated and guided by external stimuli such as the play text, director's vision, historical research, and so on) and secondly to oversee the *realisation* of this Design Concept through the marshalling of human, technical and other resources. According to this conventional understanding, the first phase is essentially complete before the second begins, so that any alterations during the second phase are to bring the realised lighting into line with the unchanging imagined Design Concept. The *design-as-(conceptual)-object* model also implies linear, procedural processes for both the imagination and realisation of the design.

For at least some lighting designers, including Rick Fisher, the model of *design-as-(conceptual)-object* sits in an uneasy tension with their lived experience:

I found that when I had done a show, and preferably done a show often, as in *An Inspector Calls* or as in *Swan Lake* ... I found that when I was talking about [what had made these shows work] that I kind of felt ... something of a fraud, thinking that, oh – they must have thought that I sat down at the drawing board and had these ideas, these goals, and figured out how to achieve them, and put them into practice and tweaked them and refined them, and – you know – that was it. That somehow the Eureka moment of lighting design was at the drawing board, or even before you got to the drawing board. And the truth of the matter for me is that it is almost never that way.

If Fisher's self-understanding can be taken as indicative of that of lighting designers more generally (and it certainly accords with my own experience), then the model of *design-as-(conceptual)-object* is inadequate, and we need to call into question the objecthood – the 'thing-ness' – of what we call 'the lighting design'.

Karin Knorr Cetina uses the terms "knowledge objects" and "epistemic objects" to refer to what is worked on and produced in creative and constructive practices such as science and technology research [Knorr Cetina 2001]. For Knorr Cetina, "Knowledge objects differ in important ways from ... commodities, instruments, and everyday things ... epistemic objects [are] defined by their lack of completeness of being and their nonidentity with themselves."

Furthermore, "The lack of completeness of being of knowledge objects goes hand in hand with the dynamism of research. Only incomplete objects pose further questions, and only in considering objects as incomplete do scientists move forward with their work." [Knorr Cetina 2001, 176]. I would argue that the research scientist and the lighting designer (and indeed other artists) have similar relationships with the epistemic objects that they create, and that Knorr Cetina's model of science research practices can equally be applied to the practices of the lighting designer. In both cases, the goals are only broadly defined, and – while each has a 'toolbox' of processes and

techniques to draw on – there is no deterministic procedure for reaching those goals: both are ‘creative’ activities in that neither ends nor means are fully known at the outset.

The characteristics of epistemic objects that Knorr Cetina describes also offer a good fit with those of lighting designs: where “Epistemic objects frequently exist simultaneously in a variety of forms [and] have multiple instantiations, which range from figurative, mathematical, and other representations to material realizations” [Knorr Cetina 2001, 182], lighting designs also take on a variety of instantiations such as ideas, notes, sketches, plans, configurations of lighting equipment, data in the lighting console, and light on stage in performance. Each of these configurations ‘is’ the lighting design, yet none of them are *fully* the lighting design. Also, Knorr Cetina argues that “even when such an [epistemic object] is officially declared ‘finished’ and ‘complete,’ the respective experts are acutely aware of its faults, of how it ‘could’ have been improved, of what it ‘should’ have become and did not.” This accords with Fisher’s statement that (on productions that he has lit numerous times in different venues over several years) “I still find the blank piece of paper frightening, but I kind of know a little bit more about what I want to achieve, and I know that I know how to make certain things kind of work”¹. Despite the design having been ‘finished’ (in the sense of being realized as a part of public performances of the production), for Fisher the design is still incompletely known, and still presents unanswered questions. He claims only to “know a *little* bit more” about his goals, and only to “know how to make certain things *kind* of work”. As with Knorr Cetina’s epistemic object, “The ‘finished’ [design] is itself always incomplete, is itself simply another partial object.” [Knorr Cetina 2001, 183]

It is Knorr Cetina’s model of the epistemic object that is continually changing and revealing itself – unfolding – that I want to use as an alternative to the static and inert *design-as-(conceptual)-object*, and it brings with it two important implications. Firstly, the *design-as-a-process-of-unfolding* model implies that design decisions are always provisional, since the design itself is never ‘finished’ and always open to review and change. In terms of the lighting designer’s process, the two-stage *imagine-and-realise* model is replaced by a process of continual review and

tentative decision-making that leads to the moment of performance. As that moment approaches, the range of possibilities still being held open narrows and finally collapses into ‘what happens’. In such a model the lighting designer’s period of creative judgement and decision-making is extended beyond the initial ‘imagining’ stage, so that the model can give an account of the lighting designer’s process that offers a better fit with Rick Fisher’s self-description and (I suspect) with the lived experience of many lighting designers.

Knorr Cetina’s model of the epistemic object also has implications for our understanding of the lighting designer’s relationship with the design. The model of *design-as-(conceptual)-object* implies a one-way subject-object relationship, in which the lighting designer as controlling subject creates and ‘works on’ the design as a malleable, controlled object. In such a relationship, designers are presumed to be – through their professional expertise – ‘in command’. Again, this model does not match Fisher’s self-understanding: he “still panic[s] at the drawing board: an empty piece of paper is [his] greatest enemy, [he] will do anything but sit down and make those first few marks on the paper.”² On the other hand, the model of *design-as-a-process-of-unfolding* (based on Knorr Cetina’s epistemic objects) constructs the relationship between designer and design as a two-way process, in which each stimulates, and is stimulated by, the other. According to Knorr Cetina, “the defining characteristic of an epistemic object is this changing, unfolding character – or its lack of ... completeness of being ... The lack in completeness of being is crucial: objects of knowledge ... must ... be conceived of as unfolding structures of absences: as things that continually ‘explode’ and ‘mutate’ into something else” [Knorr Cetina 2001, 182]. It is the lack of completeness and dynamic features of epistemic objects that require the lighting designer to continually ask questions of the design and – in Fisher’s terms – to allow the show to “begin to tell [him] how to do it”, rather than for the designer to dictate to the design.

I want now to look in more detail at the lighting designer's process, starting with Rick Fisher's description of his extensive and systematic use of sidelight in *An Inspector Calls* at the Royal National Theatre in London, and later at many other theatres around the world:

The designer had drawn a piece of scenery through the number one bar³, so that wasn't going to work for me, and because the number one bar wasn't there to set up those rep. systems⁴, the number two and the number three and the number six didn't really make much sense either.

And when you turned on [the overhead lighting], the floor looked like it was made of plastic⁵ – because it was – whereas if you skimmed it with a little bit of light or you kept light off it, it got reflected light in a way like you used to light old-fashioned scenery, which was that you didn't ... So, I found that I was doing that with my floor – I was not lighting it directly, I was lighting the people. And then as I realised that whenever we turned on that cue that had [the sidelight] in it, we liked it more than the cues that didn't, slowly but surely cutting the overhead rig.

As I recreated that design over and over again [at different venues] and improved on it, and solved its problems – the new problems that that kind of lighting created – I found that I could talk about it and have this so-called system, that was not by any means a unique personal discovery, but it was rationalised or it was explainable after I had done it, as opposed to: oh, this is what I am going to try and do.⁶

Fisher describes how his systematic use of sidelight in *An Inspector Calls* came about because of two effectively *accidental* factors: the stage floor and the repertoire lighting rig. These accidental factors acted as 'seeds' to the creative process. Gilles Deleuze's work *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation* [Deleuze 2005] gives an account of Bacon's working methods and self-understanding as a painter, in which the accidental also serves as a seed to the creative process. Deleuze's analysis of Bacon's working methods is wide-ranging, but for my purposes I want to concentrate on two particular concepts – that of the 'diagram'⁷, and that of 'analogical language'.

According to Deleuze, the diagram is

a preparatory work that belongs to painting fully, and yet precedes the act of painting ... What does this act of painting consist of? Bacon defines it in this way:

make random marks ... scrub, sweep, or wipe the canvas in order to clear out locales or zones (color-patches); throw the paint, from various angles and at various speeds. [Deleuze 2005, 70]

The purpose of the diagram is to remove the presuppositions from the canvas and from the painter's head, in order to prevent painter and painting falling into cliché; for Bacon, the avoidance of cliché is essential, and the diagram is a way to admit chance and the accidental because the marks that it consists of concern only the *hand* of the painter. Bacon's emphasis on the hand of the painter is significant – he seeks to avoid intellectualising the process of painting. The diagram can (at least partially) replace intellectual thought and decision-making as a guide to further action.

The second concept I want to adopt from Deleuze is analogical – as opposed to digital – language: for Deleuze, a digital language consists of semiotic codes that comprise discrete units (hence 'digital') while an analogue language “would be a language of relations, which consists of expressive movements, paralinguistic signs, breaths and screams, and so on.” [Deleuze 2005, 79] Analogical languages do not have the conventional organisation and coding of digital languages, but neither do they necessarily function by resemblance. As Deleuze points out, “A scream no more resembles what it signals than a word resembles what it designates” [Deleuze 2005, 80], but may work affectively or aesthetically through an analogy of sensation, “both nonfigurative and noncodified.” [Deleuze 2005, 81] In other words, the analogy is between two things that ‘feel like’ each other. I would argue that lighting for theatre performance operates to a significant extent in a “nonfigurative and noncodified” way. While light on stage may figuratively represent light within the fictional stage world (light from a table-lamp, sunlight through a window) or be symbolically coded (such as colours used to mark particular emotions or ideas), for many lighting designers and for many kinds of performance it is light's sensual, affective dimension that is most important.

For Deleuze, the diagram must be understood in terms of analogical language: “The diagram, the agent of analogical language, does not act as a code, but as a modulator.” [Deleuze 2005, 84] The diagram is not to be ‘read’ or ‘de-coded’ (as with digital languages), or interpreted in terms of visual similitude, but serves to transform clichéd inputs into expressive, sensory outputs.

To read Fisher's account of his development and use of side lighting in *An Inspector Calls* in terms of the Diagram, the given factors of the set design and construction, together with the repertoire lighting rig of the Lyttleton Theatre that provided a range of predefined lighting angles not specific to this particular production, acted as the equivalent of the 'pre-painting'. The floor and the repertoire rig were in effect accidental to the lighting of *An Inspector Calls*. Neither had been designed to allow the creation of particular aesthetic lighting effects for that production, but as accidental elements they 'seeded' the development of the design, suggesting possible avenues that turned out to be productive and leading to what later became a systematic – and retrospectively rationalised – design technique.

Also, Fisher's use of sidelight was not simply a technical solution to the problem of lighting the floor, although it started as such; rather, the sidelight came to be a key lighting motif. The sidelight served to highlight the performers, increasingly lifting them out of the stage picture as the play progressed so that the characters were presented to the audience for detailed examination – a visual equivalent to the examination that, in the play, the character of Inspector Goole gives the Birling Family. In the later part of the play, the lighting – dominated by the sidelight – was neither figurative (as was the earlier use of stage light to represent the sky- and lamp-light of an evening street scene) nor was it coded (as harsh front light to represent the interrogator's lamp would have been). Instead the sidelight operated at the level of feeling, of sensation, to create an aesthetic effect expressed (to use Deleuze's term) in an analogical language. The floor and repertoire rig, as a diagram, acted as a modulator, shaping Fisher's developing lighting design in a continuous and variable way: "whenever we turned on that cue that had that element in it [the sidelight], we liked it more than the cues that didn't, slowly but surely cutting the overhead rig".

In summary, the widely-held model of lighting design as a two-part process, firstly imagining and afterwards realising the design, is not a good fit with at least some lighting designers' practice and self-understanding. In Rick Fisher's terms, the Eureka moment is not – at least not *often* – at the

drawing board. I want to propose an alternative model, drawing on Karin Knorr Cetina's work, in which the design is an epistemic or knowledge object that is never fully realised, always partially absent, and always in the process of unfolding. Deleuze's account of Bacon's practice as a painter further contributes to this model, pointing out that not only do designers make use of the accidental (as Fisher did with his design for *An Inspector Calls*), but that such a use of the accidental can be adopted as a strategy through the 'diagram'. The diagram provides a controlled and strategic way to seed the work with stimuli that are not intellectual or codified in origin, but work through an analogical language of sensation.

It is time to abandon the drawing board as a metaphor for lighting design, with the implication of rationality and linear process that goes with it. I have begun to outline a replacement model of the lighting designer's activity that might offer a more realistic and productive way of understanding what lighting designers do and how they do it, to the benefit of the accounts we give of lighting design as a professional practice, to the benefit of lighting design education, and to the benefit of the self-understanding of lighting designers themselves.

This paper draws on the author's research towards his doctoral thesis, entitled "Repositioning the Role of the Lighting Artist in Live Theatre Performance Using Digital Technology", which seeks to establish both theoretically and practically a basis for the theatre lighting artist as performer.

¹ Interview with Rick Fisher, 06/08/2007.

² Interview with Rick Fisher, 06/08/2007.

³ The most downstage overhead lighting position in a conventional proscenium arch theatre, and a crucial position for the systematic approaches to lighting actors' faces commonly used in the UK lighting tradition.

⁴ Repertoire systems: standardised, systematic ways of lighting the stage in grid-like areas, employed by the Royal National Theatre and other repertoire theatres. Working in repertoire means that lighting cannot be rigged and focused specifically for each production but must be based on a largely fixed lighting rig in order that the lighting can be changed from one production to the next overnight.

⁵ Much of the scenic floor was designed as a representation of a cobbled street.

⁶ Interview with Rick Fisher, 06/08/2007.

⁷ Bacon uses the word 'graph' in English, which Deleuze translates as 'diagramme' in French. Diagramme is then retranslated as 'diagram' in the English translation of Deleuze's text that I have referred to.

Bibliography

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