

## Seeing Anew: the role of lighting in creation of place in site-generic/specific performance.

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This paper explores the role of lighting in creating place and the challenges and opportunities introduced by site based performance.

I will use examples from two productions, both written by Clare Norburn, entitled *Vision* and *Breaking the Rules*. Both works take the form of a 'concert drama' in which a composer protagonist guides us through a biographic narrative, interspersed by the music they wrote or were inspired by.

*Vision* focuses on the life and work of Hildegard von Bingen, an 11<sup>th</sup> Century German Benedictine abbess who claimed she had visions that led her to compose music, poetry and create paintings and illustrations conveying messages from God.

*Breaking the Rules* concerns a 16<sup>th</sup> Century composer, Carlo Gesulado, Prince of Venosa, Count of Conza and generally a nasty piece of work. Renowned for brutally murdering his wife and her lover, among others, his music was groundbreaking in the period and is widely considered to be one of the earliest composers to use a chromatic language.

*Vision* was premiered in 2011 at St Bartholomew's church in Brighton, but was revived in 2019 with a new director, Nicholas Renton. Renton also directed *Breaking the Rules* which premiered in the crypt of St Mary Magdalene's church in Paddington, London in 2015.

Both works have toured a mixture of churches and buildings of character, but rarely been staged in theatre venues. The rare occasion when they have, the resulting performance has been markedly different to the main tour. It became very clear that the nature of the venue itself was integral to the performance and had a significant impact. As lighting designer for the works, I learned that I also needed to acknowledge this. It was not possible to light the works identically in every venue. For logistic reasons such as available power, locations for tripods etc, but also because each space received light and behaved with it in very different ways.

The tours became a learning curve in the challenges afforded by site based performance, but also the potential and the opportunities. What I would like to share with you today is a little of my approach and the ideas I have drawn on to develop a site-responsive style of lighting, informed by site-specific dance practice.

In her book with Brian Massumi, Erin Manning discusses Whitehead's 1967 notion of "two-way movement of reciprocal interfusion" (24) – the bi-directional relationship between body and site. The example of a sofa or couch is given; "The couch fits itself to the body, as the body spreads itself over the couch" (24). Cited in this chapter, Arakawa and Gins note that "What emanates from bodies and what emanates from architectural surrounds intermix" (2002:61) and this intermingling of site and body became central to my lighting approach on these projects.

Vision perhaps gave me the clearest understanding of needing to find the relationship between body and site, and light and site. Hildegard refers frequently to a notion of the “living light” as the source of her visions. It is a light that has a sense of force and physicality that impacts Hildegard’s body. We discovered that what came across as powerful and forceful light in one venue simply didn’t read the same way in the next. In every venue I had to rediscover the ‘living light’ and as the tour progressed, I began to understand the ways in which this was connected to four things (the first two of which I will address in this paper):

1. the body of the building,
2. its existing relationships with light,
3. the historical and social uses of the building and
4. the geometric relationships, including scale.

With each venue so dramatically different from the next this resulted in a lighting design that was dynamic and evolving. I toured with the work so that it could be that. Each space was a re-light. It was impossible to set a design and roll it out across all venues.

But why was it impossible?

I could have done exactly that. The cues would have been the same. The same lighting instruments (everything was toured). So what WAS it that demanded a relight?

I believe it comes down to this: the intermingling between the body of the place and the body of the light resulted in creating different spaces and thereby the experience of different places.

The design became a score, a set of atmospheres, triggers and sense of movement (as a drawing of space, as movement between different time periods and between different memories).

Accompanying this ‘template’ was a set of ‘attunements’ or mental exercises that would help me identify the best way to achieve the template in the new venue. Drawing strongly on a phenomenological method, I found that the approach I used also drew from my background in working with contemporary dance and the resonances with site-specific dance practice became quite obvious.

Site specific dance is influenced by “the choreographer’s response to a particular site and/or location” (Hunter, 2015:33), “the choreographer essentially enters into a ‘dialogue’ *with* the space whereby the performance works with the site as opposed to becoming imposed on it.” (2015:36).

Dr Vicky Hunter devised an interesting model of influence, outlining the relationship between the site and the creative process. [see slide] As shown in this diagram, the model suggests a creation of a new ‘space’ by the process of site specific choreographic devising.

“In a sense, this interaction between site, performance, and observer results in the creation of a new ‘space’, the conceptual space of performance that exists only temporarily yet brings a new dimension to the architectural location.” (2015:36)

This rings true of both Vision and Breaking the Rules. There have often been performances where audience members who are very familiar with the location will speak to me after the show and express how they had seen the space anew, and I feel this is evidence of that new ‘space’ Hunter write about.

Hunter's model describes quite well the initial part of my process when entering a new venue. My perception of the space, its context, architecture and atmosphere leads me to make decisions around the way it might be interpreted as the place(s) within the performance.

"The process of perceiving space can be defined as a form of absorbing and ordering information gained while experiencing and interacting with space. Perception can be seen as a process of 'making sense' of this information, a process that is particular to each individual." (Hunter, 2015:25)

Hunter discusses Bryan Lawson's explanation of how the brain prioritises information when recreating a space in our mind's eye.

"Lawson identifies these elements as:

Verticality

Symmetry

Colour

Number (of windows, columns, doors etc.)

Meaning (i.e. 'labels' church, gallery, etc.)

Context (our context when entering a space)" (Lawson, 2001:62-8, cited in Hunter, 2015:27)

What I found these elements translate to is essentially a primer for working with light in an impactful way. They provide a scale against which the lighting designer may make informed choices about how to express a particular moment or place within the performance. They are, however, only a starting point.

I have begun to explore a practice rooted in phenomenology and highlighting encounters with place through event. Rachel Sara's research identifies an ocular-centric approach in architecture, that can also be found in lighting and suggests that "an over-emphasis on the eye denies the rest of the body" (Sara in Hunter 2015:64-65).

Returning to the 4 points I mentioned earlier that were connected to my finding of the 'living light' in each venue, Lawson's prioritised elements connect with point 1 – The BODY of the building.

Point 2 – The existing relationships with light, draws on my own experiences of the building in two ways. Firstly, my technical knowledge, a very present and fixed set of data against which I will analyse things like the way a surface will reflect or absorb light, how a particular type of stone might affect colour rendition. But I also began to acknowledge the importance of a second way of gathering information about the existing relationships with light in the space. A phenomenological exploration that considers my embodied responses to the space, paying attention to small detail that might otherwise be 'assumed' by familiarity or taking for granted. This has become by far the more valuable set of data. Although extremely personal, it taps into the potential for light to be used in a kinesthetic way to enhance the audience experience of place. Through drawing on the experience of the body, the place of performance becomes the whole building, working together with the director's choices regarding processional elements and use of various parts of the building this creates a new place within the building that is not restricted to a designated 'stage'. Foster, cited in McKinney suggests that "as in choreography, the effect of empathy with objects means the spectator finds themselves pulled into the 'volumetric totality' of the experience through playing close attention to the dynamic interaction of body, space and objects" (Foster, 2011:155 in McKinney 2012:224). McKinney goes on to note "Kinesthetic empathy in the context of scenography

emphasises the body as a means of detecting and locating ourselves in relation to an environment, to other objects and to other bodies.” (McKinney, 2012:233) Through connecting specifically with light in an embodied way I found that I was able to understand the behaviour of the building (in relation to atmospheres, intensity of light, and focusing of attention) in a way that didn't *impose* my technical knowledge, but use it to work *with* the building's natural experiences of light.

Susan Kozel's book 'Closer' provides a useful reference for working with technology in a way that comes from the choreographic and the experience of the body. She identifies the potential of this kind of practice to destabilise, an experience that I certainly feel I had in allowing sensation to take over my trained technical knowledge. I became deeply aware of movement – not just of transitions, but the way that light would dance across the moving body, the resulting movement of shadow across surface. This reminded me very much of the fact that I was not, I never had been, in complete control of light. Kozel references Merleau-Ponty's notion of the seeing-seen, and proposes a “dancing-danced” (date: 39). I would extend that in my own practice to consider a lighting-lit, a bi-directional play of the experience of being both subject and object that allows for a perspective that embraces the processual nature of lighting.

“There is a losing of oneself in the chiasmic composition of touch, vision, and movement, a destabilization of identity that is fundamentally creative.” (Kozel, date:39)

In my PhD thesis I aim to explore further the potentials of employing a site-specific dance informed approach to lighting as a methodology for reintroducing the body in lighting practice. I am excited by what relationships might be forged through encouraging dialogues between light, architecture, and movement in the construction of place and event.

Rachel Sara writes of her collaborative project with Alice Sara exploring dance and architecture and notes that “use constructs the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place. When you change the function, atmosphere and meaning of a place then you construct architecture.... The shift in focus from architecture as being concerned with the building, to the intersection between place and event, therefore begins to imply a commonality with dance, as an activity that is concerned with constructing event and place.” (Sara, 2015:62-64)

In using the church building as a performance space there is a change in atmosphere, there is a change in the relationship between its audience and building – especially for those who worship there – these changes are as much a part of constructing place as the semiotic and narrative devices within the performance. Light plays a significant role in this. In shifting the sources, directions and intensities of light in the space, the building is enabled to 'dance', or move in new ways. While traditional approaches to lighting have a tendency to focus on meaning and how the space might be read, the creation of place must step further than semiotics and embrace the whole building.

“Place is always multi-sensorial and phenomenological by definition” (Hann, 2019:20).

I wonder, what is at stake when we slip into an ocular-centric construction of space?

My approach to lighting for *Vision and Breaking the Rules* draws on Rachel Hann's definition of scenography as “place orientation” (Hann, 2019:37). I take the position that place differs from space in the way that it resonates, it means something to the perceiver, it orientates. It has a purpose, which may be narrative or ordering. It has time, be that a specific period or durational information. It has atmosphere created by the assemblages present.

In my scores for these works each cue had a purpose routed in some kind of movement to another place (be that location, time, mood, internal external). In each venue I would need to identify the

best way to create that place. From my knowledge and understanding of the cues, I knew there were certain places (including moods and sensations) that I would want to create [SLIDE]

- Closed in
- Vast open space
- Forcefulness
- The rug being pulled
- Being looked down on

In order to help me achieve those places I devised a set of questions about the space that would help me find those places. [SLIDE]

- What aspects of the building are naturally screaming at me?
- Where are the quiet details?
- What presses?
- What closes in?
- Where can I find space?
- Where could I reach?
- Where is secure?
- Where is vulnerable?

Together with noting my experiences of the building during the day, I gathered information that helped me find ways to take the audience to different places within the building, beyond simply illuminating a performance that happened to take place in a church.

In recognising my own embodied responses to the building and focusing on sensations rather than images, I sought to challenge the ocular-centric nature of lighting practice and engage the audience in a way that connected to their *experience* of space, not just their view of it.

This example is from a performance of *Breaking the Rules* at the Priory Church of St George in Dunster that took place in May of this year. [slide diary notes].

In a church venue I am usually plotting in the daylight. I use my experiences of how the building behaves in daylight to inform my decisions and diary notes like these are very important to that as they focus my attention. Considering what the building contributes and working with it brings me back again to Whitehead's reciprocal interfusion. You cannot eradicate the sensations the building creates, so I found ways to work with them in dialogue.

Sometimes however, I am powerless.

At the Priory Church in Dunster the main performance area faced a West facing window.

There is a scene in *Breaking the Rules* where Gesualdo is recounting a happy memory of his mother. It is springtime, she is laughing. Gerald Kydd's movements are fluid, comfortable, relaxed. In a moment the scene changes, Gesualdo's mother falls down dead. Gerald stands still, the life almost draining from him as grief crashes over him like a wave.

During this scene at Dunster, the sun was setting. A wonderful warm light flooded through the West window and bathed the pews and the stage. In the moment of his mother's death, my lighting score shifts to a steely sidelight, draining the performance area of the colour and warmth that had been there before. At the same moment, the sun dipped below the window.

The resulting loss of warm light drained not only Gesulado's face, but the whole church. There was a palpable sense of emptying. It was an exquisite moment and you could sense the audience were caught too in the grief and sense of cold emptiness settling onto the pews. The physicality of the movement of lighting in the space transitioned us to a different place – both emotionally and physically. We returned from this moment of memory to the present.

That moment, for me, cemented my joy of working in a site-responsive way with light. Despite the challenges (SJSS ridiculous daylight), it has provided me with encounters that I have never / would never have in a theatre space. It has taught me the value of engaging with the sensations and movement of light and not focusing totally on the image. As Tim Edensor notes "Light is what kindles feeling", therefore, light is essential to place.

Through these projects I've been led to question even more the position of lighting – is it scenographic, or choreographic? I propose that it is easily both. But what my research is interested in now is; what is the difference? What changes in the role of lighting between these two perspectives?

Is it about place orientation vs orientation of the body?

If so, I posit that the choreographic has much more to contribute to lighting as we begin to allow light more agency in a new materialist ontology.