

L/Nightsapes: Perspectives on Illumination and the City (Cologne, 29–31 Oct 24)

Institute for Media Culture and Theater and the Department of Art History, University of Cologne, Germany, Oct 29–31, 2024

Deadline: Apr 30, 2024

Patricia Pia Bornus

23rd NECS Graduate Workshop:

«Naturalized in its ubiquity, its benefits countless, its bright, crisp, visual character the very image of optimism and reason, electric light has become inextricable from modern life and, at the same time, unremarkable» (Isenstadt, 2018).

The open-source Website nigtearth.com provides the visitor with a «visual representation of the Earth's surface at night», as is stated on the site. With their project – an explorable and movable 3-D-model of the globe –, the initiators attempt to draw attention to the unequal distribution of illumination across the globe and especially the problem of light pollution: Illuminated metropolitan areas appear as 'beacons of light' whereas other parts of the globe are plunged into darkness. An intricate mesh of light connects transportation networks, illuminated metropolitan areas, infrastructures, and industrial centers. While [nigtearth's](http://nigtearth.com) project swerves between beauty and environmental concerns, it does not directly question or investigate the complex geopolitical, historical, post-colonial, racial, gendered, environmental, social, and infrastructural entanglements that are embedded in these networks. Drawing on nigtearth.com and other representations of earths illumination at night, we want to invite scholars from film and media studies, visual culture studies and art history to address and discuss the multifaceted interconnections of illumination and the city.

Forms and Materials of Illumination: We aim to broaden the scope of possible topics beyond electric light and therefore suggest thinking with and through all forms of artificial lighting. Before electricity reshaped illumination in public and private spaces, other materials had been used to light up darkened interiors, streets, or buildings: gas, wax and oil have been employed since antiquity. More widespread illumination of cityscapes that share similarities with modern practices are documented from the 17th century onwards. With the advent of electricity, older forms of lighting have been gradually displaced; the discourse on surveillance and security played an important role. Yet, the tale of the electric revolution also focuses mainly on the so-called West.

Different forms of illumination display different qualities: The glare of strong electric bulbs or the flicker of gas lamps; the possibilities of the bendable and colorful neon-tubes have been explored as part of the allure of the Las Vegas strip as much as by artists working with their aesthetics in the Concept Art of the 1960s. Also, the quality of these different lighting materials needs to be considered in concert with their surroundings, other materials such as textiles, different metals,

and glass. Their materiality and sensuality impinge upon how the l/nightscapes are being perceived, lived through, and mediated.

Architecture, Monuments, Signs: Artificial Lighting has engendered iconic illuminated landmarks, whether it is the famous view of Times Square in New York, flooded with glowing advertisements, Shibuya Crossing or the Akihabara district in Tokyo. In some cases, artificial lighting has been transformed into architecture itself. Furthermore, the lighting of public spaces can be understood along the lines of (self-)representation, since popular and historically or otherwise important monuments and places are usually lit to demarcate their significance – for instance, the spectacularisation of the pyramids in Egypt. At the same time, light can be used in a purely pragmatic fashion, by highlighting signs of pharmacies, police stations or crossroads. Yet, the symbolic meaning of light is not only utilized along the lines of social significance. An accumulation of light – or its absence – points towards and embodies the unequal distribution of power, resources, and economy.

L/Nightscapes and the Arts: Illuminated cityscapes have also resonated with artists of different times and cultural backgrounds. Urban lighting has become a motif or a topic in many genres of art, ranging from caricatures through film to song. The atmosphere and visual value of cities flooded in bright and colorful light have developed into a common element in many contemporary visual cultures. While being a common motif, illuminated cityscapes do not always serve the same narratives. Rather, the motif can be utilized as a projection screen to represent many different artistic intentions. When l/nightscapes are not used as a visual value, what do they stand in for? Which narratives are being catered to? Which narratives have been underrepresented? The adaptations of l/nightscapes in visual media can serve as a crystallization of different cultural, historical, and political applications of urban lighting.

The 23rd NECS Graduate Workshop calls for contributions that explore the entanglements of artificial lighting with urbanity, visual culture, media infrastructures, sustainability, and the environment, as well as artistic productions throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. We welcome a range of perspectives that address historical case studies as well as contemporary discourses and objects connected but not limited to:

- L/Nightscapes and gender
- Making L/Nightscapes
- Documenting L/nightscapes
- Materials of illumination and the city
- City, light and post/de-coloniality
- Illumination and/as architecture
- Artistic representations of l/nightscapes
- Cultural history of illumination
- Visual culture of the illuminated city
- Artistic interventions in the city with light
- Illumination and affect

Submission

In our two-and-a-half-day workshop we want to bring together scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds for an interdisciplinary workshop on Illuminated Cityscapes. We welcome submis-

sions from PhD Candidates and early-career researchers. The invited speakers should present papers of 15-20 min length.

The workshop is conceptualized as an in-person event at the University of Cologne, the working language will be English. The organizers will provide a list of affordable accommodations and additional travel information, but travel and accommodation costs will need to be covered by the participants themselves. A joint conference dinner as well as smaller events are part of the program; their costs will be covered by the organizers. Workshop attendance is free. NECS members need to validate their membership in order to attend. For the terms of NECS membership, please also refer to the website: <https://necs.org/faq>;

The workshop will also offer places for non-NECS members to present their work. According to the suitability of submissions, the spots will be distributed equally between NECS members and non-members.

Please send your abstracts (max. 500 words) and a brief biographical note (max. 150 words) to illuminated-city@uni-koeln.de by April 30th, 2024, at the latest. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by the End of May 2024. Graduate Workshop Organizers: Patricia Pia Bornus (Cologne) and Bianka-Isabell Scharmann (Cologne/Amsterdam)

Reference:

CFP: L/Nightscapes: Perspectives on Illumination and the City (Cologne, 29-31 Oct 24). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 26, 2024 (accessed Jul 1, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/41526>>.