

Light and Darkness (online/Oxford, 26–27 Jun 25)

Online / Oxford Brookes University, Jun 26–27, 2025

Deadline: Mar 9, 2025

Dr Manila Castoro

Light and Darkness: Imaging the Night in the British Empire.

“The sun never sets on the British Empire” was more than a celebratory assertion of the vastness of colonial dominion; it embodied the ideological underpinnings of the British imperial project. Central to this ideology was the interplay between the symbolic and material constructs of 'light' and 'darkness,' through which the empire represented itself as an 'empire of light.' This framing, grounded in epistemological and symbolic discourses, positioned the British as agents of enlightenment tasked with dispelling the metaphorical 'darkness' of regions perceived as less developed, thereby legitimising the so-called 'civilising mission' (Dinkar 2020). Such narratives extended beyond abstraction, significantly shaping the physical and cultural landscapes of the colonies.

Within this binary of light and darkness, the colonial night emerges as a critical site of imperial meaning-making. Engrained in negative connotations and framed as a space “beyond our reach” (Phillips, 2023), the colonial night became deeply entwined with notions of eeriness, filth, and degeneration. These associations were often reinforced through the lenses of tropicalism and orientalism, which permeated colonial travelogues and literary accounts (Baker, 2015). Additionally, the night metaphorically served to construct racial ideologies, symbolising an unconscious darkness that underpinned imperialist perceptions of racial and cultural inferiority (Goggin, 2024).

The antithetical relationship between light and darkness also translated into the strategic implementation of illumination and electrification across the British Empire, particularly in colonial urban centres. The introduction of lighting played a pivotal role in colonial governance, symbolising the imposition of 'modernity' and the technological advancement associated with imperial control. By dispelling the obscurity of night and transforming public spaces into illuminated, surveillable environments, colonial authorities reinforced their dominance and sought to showcase the supposed benevolence and progressiveness of the imperial mission (Hasenöhr, 2018; Schivelbusch, 1995).

Building on this multifaceted context, this two-day conference seeks to deepen the emerging yet underexplored discourse on the visual construction of the night within the British colonies, spanning the late 19th to the mid-20th century – a period marking the height of imperial domination and the gradual processes of decolonisation. The conference invites critical engagement with the ways in which visual culture contributed to constructing and entrenching imperialist narratives about the colonial night, particularly through the symbolic and material dichotomy of light and darkness, while also examining how these frameworks were resisted, contested, and reimagined.

Based on the themes outlined above, key questions for exploration include:

- How were conceptions of night and nocturnality – and, by extension, light and darkness – visually constructed within the ideological frameworks of the British Empire?
- In what ways did colonial subjects engage with, subvert, or reconfigure these visual narratives?
- Furthermore, how might indigenous conceptions of nocturnality have been creatively employed to disrupt imperial discourses and assert alternative visual epistemologies?

While contributions focusing on the impact of photography on these narrations are particularly welcome, submissions addressing a broad spectrum of visual practices – including painting, illustration, advertising, posters, and beyond – are encouraged.

Potential themes for investigation could include, but are not limited to:

- The industrialisation of light and the modernity project in the British colonies
- The colonial night as a space of danger, vulnerability, and marginality
- The night as a site of othering
- Propagandistic constructions of gendered and racialised narratives of the colonial night
- Urban nocturnal public life and night entertainment in the colonies
- Nocturnal labour and productivity in colonial economies
- Nighttime journeys, exploration, and the exoticisation of nocturnal colonial landscapes
- Chiaroscuro and nocturne motifs (e.g., moonlit nightscape paintings)
- Domestic, institutional, and symbolic illuminated and unlit interiors
- The night as a time for indigenous spiritual practices, dreams, or supernatural encounters
- The night as a time for contestation and resistance
- Indigenous conceptions of light and darkness

Please submit a 300-word abstract and a 100-word biography to Manila Castoro at mcastoro@brookes.ac.uk by March 9th, 2025. Contributions from diverse academic and geographic contexts are especially welcome. In your submission, kindly indicate whether you would attend in person or online, as hybrid panels will be available to facilitate participation from under-represented regions.

Selected papers from the conference will be considered for inclusion in an edited volume with a respected academic journal or publisher.

Reference:

CFP: Light and Darkness (online/Oxford, 26-27 Jun 25). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 12, 2025 (accessed Apr 5,

2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43663>>.