

LIGHTING AS ART

Writing About Design

Writers dealing with the various aspects of theatrical design have taken quite divergent courses:

1. Some assume that the process is so personal and varies so much from one artist to another that nothing useful can be said. This leaves the student wishing to develop his or her design talents entirely alone.
2. Some writers discuss the mechanics of the design process, organizing the studio, drafting, sculpting techniques, perspective drawing, etc., but leave the creative process out of the discussion. This does give the student designer valuable information about his/her studio and offers techniques for getting ideas expressed on paper or in three dimensions but the question, "How do I develop my designs?" remains unanswered.
3. Some discuss and illustrate past design successes, either theirs or the works of others, offering these as inspirational material for the student. Although two-dimensional illustrations of three dimensional design are often less than satisfactory, such discussions can be helpful, particularly in giving the student a vision of what can be accomplished. Unfortunately this approach is more helpful to the student designer of scenery or costumes than the designer of lighting because there is presently no effective way to display the artistic intricacies of lighting design except on the stage during a production. This approach is most helpful when adopted by a successful designer who can speak from vast experience and who is sufficiently skilled at writing to make word pictures of the lighting. Alas, such writers are rare indeed.
4. Yet other writers take a poetic/mystical approach to design. This too takes a high level of writing skill. Such writings can be found in the literature of theatre, for example, the works of Adolphe

Mechanics of the design process

Poetic/mystical approach to design

Modern aesthetics explains artistic expression.

Appia, Edward Gordon Craig and Robert Edmund Jones. They are both inspirational and informative if read by those who are able to deal with the mysticism without either rejecting it out of hand or falling so deeply under the spell of its emotional qualities that they miss the core of useful information about designing.

5. Another approach makes use of modern aesthetic writings which, unlike earlier writings in aesthetics, attempt to deal with how art expresses its “content” and, because these subjects are inextricably entwined, how artists achieve their artistic expression. This approach requires the development of a special vocabulary without which the discussion will have little meaning.

The approach of this text will follow the path through modern aesthetics but with frequent reference to the poetic/mystical approach. It will involve a short foray into the world of aesthetics to develop the necessary vocabulary.



Figure 1.1. *Nicholas Nickleby*. Dickens' story is centered on two contrasting worlds, the cruel world of the Yorkshire schools and the world of the social climbing self-absorbed upper crust. The general style of the visual production determined that abstract spaces would be made specific by acting and lighting—realism was not a consideration.

This photo illustrate how the lighting designer was able to establish contrast between these worlds, and to control the degree of attention each received, moment by moment. Note particularly how the highlighted figure in the background, while a secondary focus, still demands attention. This arrangement of lighting gives the designer precise control over the relative attention-getting power of each group of characters. Indeed, the lighting designer has the power of a director!

Scenes lit by Cindy Limauro. Produced at Carnegie Mellon Kresge Theatre. Directors, Gregory Lehane and Jed Allen Harris; set designer, Tony Mileto; costume designer, Cletus Anderson; lighting designers, Part I– Lauren Crasco, Part II– Cindy Limauro. Photo by Harold Corsini. Photos courtesy Cindy Limauro.

How Specific Can We Get?

Any discussion of a creative process, whether lighting design or musical composition, can only move so far without referring to a specific art work. Generalizations can only point the way. It comes down to this: Any aesthetic discussion of creative activity must stop at the point where the specifics of the show (or other art work) at hand begin. From that point forward, the concepts developed by the artist, or team of artists in the case of theatre, take over and can only be usefully discussed in their own terms. For example, we cannot discuss the specifics of a production of *Hamlet* unless we are thinking about a specific production done by a particular production team in a specific theatre situation. Thus this text cannot go beyond generalizations. It cannot tell you how to design your next production, only how to approach the problem. From there on, the chips are down; you must depend on your talent, skills, and past experience.

Generalizations about art are limited—we can only be specific about a particular production.



Figure 1.2. Lighting design by Cindy Limauro for a production of *Nicholas Nickleby*.



Figure 1.3 *Taming of the Shrew* (Shakespeare). Produced at the Telluride Repertory Theatre, Telluride Colorado on the Fred Shellman Memorial Stage. Producer, Suzan Beraza; director, James B. Nicola; setting and costumes, Jim Proddger; lighting, James Moody. Note the use of floor projections and the arrangement of lighting to focus on the actress. Photo by James Moody.

Defining the Art of Lighting

The art of painting creates images in paint on surfaces; music creates patterns in sound; sculpture creates three-dimensional forms, but what is the art of lighting? Much of the remainder of this text will be devoted to answering this question. For starters, here are some statements about lighting design which collectively suggest its nature:

Preliminary definition
of lighting design

- Lighting art exists in time and space.
- Rhythm is of its essence.
- It, like all art, is about human emotions; whether it actually evokes them or not depends on the situation.
- It has its original artists (designers) and its interpreters (console operators)
- It is ephemeral—its notation and its technology tell you almost nothing about it as art.
- In live theatre, it is collaborative and depends on the moving, speaking actor for its artistic clarity.
- It can be an independent art.

If you set out to create the art of lighting, you are suggesting that you know what art is. This is a large, often erroneous, assumption. Here are some statements about art in general:

- Art is about “the beautiful.”
- “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (John Keats, Ode On A Grecian Urn)
- Art is about human feelings.
- Art has no practical value.
- Artists are the last hope of civilization. (Peter Sellers)

Collaboration demands
communication
about art.

But, one might ask, “Why concern oneself about the definition of art? Why not just decide what art is for yourself and then do it?” One might well start out this way and make progress and, in some arts, one might succeed. But lighting is usually a collaborative art. That means you must share your developing creative thoughts with other artists; try to put into sentences and/or images what you and the other artists are trying to create. Without some knowledge of how communication about art gets accomplished, this gets frustrating. You will soon be forced to seek help from others who have tried to “explain” art in general and lighting in particular. In that moment, you have entered the field of *aesthetics*.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is that branch of philosophy which deals with the human concept of “the beautiful,” including art. Keats’ quote above is a typical example of a poet’s attempt to compress the philosophers’ efforts into a single line. Philosophers, not famous for their brevity, have over past centuries, written voluminous tomes on this subject. They make interesting reading, but most of them are of little value to the would-be lighting artist.

More recently, philosophy has taken a different turn, one more useful to the artist. After at least two thousand years of posing the same philosophical questions and trying to answer them with diminishing results, twentieth century philosophers came to the conclusion that there was a need for some new questions. Instead of asking for the umpteenth time What is beauty? How is it related to truth or to morality?, Susanne Langer¹ asked “*How does art achieve its expressive quality? How does it mean?*”

With this, a philosophy of art that is useful to artists came into being. Langer's discussions make the jump from "How does art express itself?" to "How is art created in the first place?"—The very job you, the lighting artist, are trying to do. Even better, Langer and her cohorts have provided us with a useful vocabulary for talking and writing about art—just what we need for our collaborative sessions with other artists.

New vocabulary for talking and writing about art

Ms. Langer, like all other philosophers who try to explain "meaning" as it relates to art, found herself dealing not only with *how art means* but also *what it means*. At that point she encountered the ages-old problem of the relationship between art and human emotions. We commonly hear in the theatre, for example, that theatrical art "evokes human emotions" or that good acting "makes the audience feel what the character is feeling." Yet we almost instinctively know that there is a vast difference between, say, experiencing sorrow at a play and experiencing it in life. Mrs. Langer went straight to the heart of this conundrum by making a clear distinction: art is *about* human feelings as opposed to *expressing* them. One learns about sorrow at the theatre, one experiences it in life—a distinction with important implications for both actors and designers.

Art is *about* human emotions.

Having clarified the difference between considering art to be an *expression* of human emotions and seeing it as being *about* them, Langer was ready to move on to a more fundamental question: How do art and life relate? Is art part of life? Outside of the normal stream of life? Irrelevant?

All of these views have been argued by philosophers who found each to be apt in some situations and useless in others. However it seems clear that *art is a way of dealing with life*.

Art is a way of dealing with life.

In the next few pages we will seek to build up a background of concepts and terms that will enable us to phrase answers to such questions as:

- How does theatre, as art, relate to life?
- How does lighting relate to theatre?
- How does lighting "mean?"
- Where does one begin a lighting design?
- How can the lighting interrelate with the rest of theatrical art?
- How can I know I am on the right artistic track?
- What are the various approaches to lighting design? How do they relate to the nature of the production?

Just a warning: We are going to find that many of these questions are far more complex than they first appear and that they and their answers—if answers turn out to be possible—are based on assumptions that may turn out to be only partly true. They will not all apply to every design job, nor will a knowledge of their "answers," guarantee the success of any design.

Also, the following discussion is theoretical with only a few practical examples. However, the next chapter, "The Designer's Variables," will illustrate the application of many of these aesthetic concepts in some detail and with special emphasis on the art of stage lighting.

¹ Langer, Susanne. *Philosophy in a New Key* and *Feeling and Form*; see Bibliography.

We begin with a somewhat deeper investigation of the relationship between art and life using Langer's thoughts as our guide:

Two Ways of Dealing with Experience

What we learn about life we first learn through our senses. We learn that bees can sting and cats can scratch most emphatically by experiencing stings and scratches. Having had the experience, we can recall it and avoid the unpleasantness a second time because we have made it into a *symbol*, a mental record that allows us to think about the experience without experiencing it again and again. Fortunately there are other ways of gaining many of life's experiences without going through the dangers of direct experience and these methods are the very heart of our discussion to come. Nevertheless most of the vast fund of human experience had its start in someone's sensory experience.

We go through life converting sensory data into symbols and then combining these symbols into more complex symbolic structures which are the material of thoughts. According to Ms. Langer, the process of *symbolic transformation*—making thoughts from sensory experiences—is what enables us to think. But humans are not merely creatures that cre-



Figure 1.4. Projected scenery for *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Donizetti). Design by Annaliese Corrodi.

ate and interrelate symbols; they are also somehow compelled to share the results of these activities. Sometimes we share the results of thoughts that examine the parts of an idea or object. This is called *analytical*. At other times we share experiences without taking them apart because we cannot do so without ruining the experience. This is called *experiential*.

The way we do the sharing depends on the nature of what is to be shared: Sharing analytical activities results in *discursive* expression; sharing experiential activities produces *nondiscursive* communications. Note that this is a special definition of the word discursive. It refers to the practice of dealing with data sequentially instead of presenting it as a whole. For example, most expressions in words are discursive: the ideas flow out in a sequence. However the use of words in poetry is usually nondiscursive—one must absorb the entire poem to perceive its meaning.

Discursive and
non-discursive
communication



Figure 1.5. *Candide* (musical adaptation by Leonard Bernstein, music and Richard Wilbur, lyrics). Produced by the Southern Illinois Theatre Department and the School of Music at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois in the McLeod Theatre. Director, Timothy Fink; scenery, Christopher DePriest; costumes, Laura Thudium; lighting, James Moody. Note the use of directional light to produce a full-stage spectacle with the emphasis down stage. Background projections fill in the picture. Photo by James Moody.



Figure 1.6. *Brother to Dragons* by Robert Penn Warren as produced at Trinity Square Repertory. Director, Adrian Hall; scenery, Eugene Lee; costumes, Laura Crow; lighting Richard Devin. This is a single-source lighting design which the blocking has utilized to focus the characters down center. Photo by Richard Devin.

Discursive Discourse

When we discuss what we have discovered by *analysis*—i.e., we take the object of our study apart mentally, if not actually, and express our findings about the parts—it is called discursive discourse. For example, a salesman might hand you a sample of a new type of spotlight hoping you will like it and order a number of them. As you examine the new toy, you might make some notes, mental or actual. Finally, you might write the whole thing up to support your request that the business office purchase of some of the spotlights. As you prepare your notes, you would organize them in some logical manner for the reader, perhaps beginning at the front of the light and working your way back, comparing the new equipment with the antiques you are presently using.

Note what has been done: You have, in an organized manner, looked at the object one part at a time and reported your findings. The emphasis of your report will be on the parts and how they work together. The report itself will be organized sequentially.

This is the essence of analysis and its resulting discursive communication. It is sequential and focuses on parts and their relationship to each other; *it explains things*.

Discursive discourse is a powerful tool. It can explain things of the greatest complexity giving the recipient a clear picture of the arrangement of the parts and how they relate to each other. It can, for example explain the intricacies of a complicated machine like the Space Shuttle, or explain the principles of quantum mechanics. Discursive discourse can take place using language, using symbols such as in mathematics or chemistry, or using the form of drawings such as working plans for a stage setting.

Nondiscursive Discourse

But we all know that there are things in life that do not willingly submit to analysis. We can take them apart but having done so, we are left with the feeling that more has been lost than gained. Analyzing a butterfly comes to mind, or a sunset, or the feeling of being in love. Entomologists may dissect butterflies, physicists explain the optical phenomena of sunsets, and psychologists write tomes on love but none of these will have the same impact on us as the work of an artist.

Yet we do experience these things in life and share them with each other. But not by analysis—not by explanation but by experiencing them as symbols which present the experience *as a whole* instead of subjecting it to analysis. This is the world of the arts, of poets, dramatists, painters—and of lighting designers—along with, of course, people in love. Philosophers call this mode of communication *presentational*.

The reason we feel compelled to place quotes around “explain” and “meaning” when applying them to art is that “explanation” belongs in the world of the discursive. “Meaning” suggests discursive or analytical activity. While it is relatively easy to separate the meaning of discursive expression from its style or form, this is not the case with art. An attempt to separate form from “content” of an artistically successful poem will lead to frustration; its “meaning” or “content” is inextricably fused into its

form. In the next chapter as we attempt to understand how lighting design affects the audience we will find that “meaning” and “content” are words we may wish to avoid using in this context. *The better term is import which does not suggest that the art work and what it seeks to express are separable or that analysis will clarify it.* Import does however effectively refer to that nondiscursive core which the art work seeks to communicate by allowing the recipient to experience it.

We now move to an examination of how art works present their import and from there to the specifics—how the art of lighting functions as a presentational symbol.

Virtual Worlds

“Virtual” has several meanings. The one we are concerned with might be best compared to the now-common concept of “virtual reality.” This is a “reality” created inside a computer and displayed to the observer by means of special headgear that shuts out most of the person’s perception of the real world around him or her and replaces it with what the computer displays—a non-real set of stimuli accepted voluntarily by the person wearing the headpiece. The viewer knows that what is seen and heard is not part of the real world, and that it has been specially created for his or her reception.

In a different and not quite so all-inclusive way, artists have been doing this for centuries. They create *virtual* worlds—worlds of metaphors—worlds where the audience is invited to make comparisons, to infer similarities and differences, thereby to discover the import of the scene. Like all arts, but even more conspicuously than most, the theatre deals in virtuality:

Consider Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: As he moves toward certain defeat and death, he utters:

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...

During this soliloquy the arts of directing, setting, costume design, sound—and particularly the art of the lighting designer—conspire to metaphorically build a virtual paradox: Either Macbeth is a villain, a bloody-handed murderer or he is tragic figure, a flawed but magnificent human being.

Just as everyday logic does not apply to what may be seen and heard through the headpiece of a virtual reality device, neither does it apply to the virtual worlds created by the arts, especially theatre. Time and space, light and darkness, logic and illogic, and even good and bad have become metaphors devised to present the vision of the artist. We may come away from a successful production of *Macbeth* somehow understanding that Shakespeare’s metaphorical paradox about Macbeth has dealt with *both* his evil and his magnificence—and we have come to understand something about the nature of mankind by experiencing it that we could have never understood by way of explanation.

Adolphe Appia, a 19-20th century stage designer and theatre aesthete, compared the virtual world of art to that of the dream. He was

The term *import* does a better job of helping us understand a work of art than do words like *meaning* and *content*.

Theatre creates virtual worlds.

Logic doesn’t apply to the virtual world of the arts.

Artists explore things
that logical minds
reject.

particularly impressed by the *freedom of the dream*, actually much the same as the freedom of virtual reality, which opens almost unending possibilities to the artist's creativity. Literal minds are left far behind. Artistic freedom allows the artist, poet, stage or lighting designer, to explore the depths of his or her imagination, to dare to imagine things the world of logic might reject. Richard Wagner, the great German operatic composer of the late 19th century gives Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger* this revealing line:

*Believe me, mans' truest illusion is oft in dreams revealed!*²

If the designer is encouraged to imagine with the freedom of the dream, what magic may ensue?

A play in production should be, in the best of possible theatre, a virtual world into which the audience is invited by its artists, *there to experience what can not be explained—by way of "truest illusion."*

A 4-D Art with the Fluidity of Music

All arts enjoy virtuality but lighting enjoys special freedoms. It can have the fluidity of music and, even more, exists in the four-dimensional world of space and time. The designer's challenge is to envision lighting within these vast horizons.

Where Does the Designer Start?

Art begins with
creative direction.

All art, including stage lighting, must begin with a *sense of creative direction*. This may come in a flash of insight (in a "dream?") or after hours or days of research or muddling about. Nevertheless, if the effort is to proceed in the direction of art, there must be a goal. It can have many names, e.g., concept, idea, artistic goal, commanding form, vision, through line, and more. Whatever the lighting designer chooses to call it, if indeed he or she calls it anything, it will be the measure of his or her work. Of course, if the theatre's goal is to produce a simple comedy, a spectacle, or merely a money-making show, the Lighting designer's goal isn't likely to have much artistic potential. Still, a goal must exist. Without some guiding objective even the most crass of show business efforts will founder from lack of organization, its lighting included.

But our course is loftier than this and we will proceed with the assurance that it is always easier to scale down the goal-seeking effort to fit simpler theatrical pieces than it is to scale up a poorly developed goal to strive for art.

² Wagner, Richard. *Die Meistersinger* as quoted in Appia, *La Musique et la Mise en Scene*. Tr. W. Bellman. Original: "Glaubt mir, des Menschens wahrster Wahn wird ihm Traume aufgethan." Emphasis in translation by wb.

Concept

Art begins with a dream and, when it succeeds, it inspires yet other dreams. This metaphorical assertion simply reminds us of those moments in the theatre (or art gallery or concert hall, or...) when we felt that we were somehow given the freedom to experience a new and wonderful insight, one to be long remembered but never really described. A lighting designer's concept must assure its creator that it will become part of this audience experience as the play evolves. To do this, the designer first must first enjoy the freedom Appia described—and must reject nothing, however outrageous it may seem to a logical mind. Then, having ventured to the farthest reaches of the imagination, in the very next moment the designer turns critic. Can this dream of mine lead to lighting that will make the play more expressive, more emphatic? Or does it merely promise to illuminate the stage floor? Does it raise the art to a higher level or simply avoid being in the way?

From dreamer to critic

These cycles of dreaming and evaluating may repeat over and over in the designer's mind but ultimately, if the design is ever to succeed, there must come an image of the lighting that passes the "dream test" and encourages the designer to move ahead.

Moving from Art to Technique

As the artist's design concept grows clearer, the need to externalize takes over. Artists, after all, are communicators. They are impelled to share their insights. To even begin to put the lighting concept down as plans and specifications and to share it with the director and other designers means change. All artists' visions change as they move from concept to studio, but the lighting designer faces even greater hurdles than most. He or she must deal with such things as electrical engineering, building and safety laws, control technology, optics and the psychology and physiology of human vision, not to mention the demands of other artists and the director as they react to the sketchy bits of information they are able to derive from preliminary discussions. Therefore the changes may be massive. The final product may, at least to the designer, seem far removed from the original dream. This leads some lighting artists to argue that original concept means little; what counts is what evolves as the lighting is put together first on paper, then on the stage—a notion that either underestimates the power of the artist's original dreams or, sadly, describes his or her willingness to let expediency overcome artistic ideals. One must take refuge in the assurance that change is the essence of creative activity, but change *within the realm of the original dream*. If the art work is not changing, it is stagnating and headed for the trash bin.

The artwork must grow and change or die.

We now move ahead to the designer's next and more concrete phase, converting the general concept (the product of the dream) into the lighting plot. Although the plot itself is almost completely technical to an outsider (and even to the technical director, the crew chief and the crew itself), it is to the designer a set of plans that will enable him or her to bring the concept to fulfillment by cueing the lighting once the plot has been converted into actual equipment organized and ready for use.